

Inflight medical emergencies: Is there a doctor onboard?

Due to an increase in the frequency of onboard medical emergencies, the International Air Transport Association (IATA) has initiated flight crew to receive medical training. According to Marcia Le Roux, executive head: medical and travel at Europ Assistance South Africa, a prominent international airline recently announced that in 2016 alone, it had to divert 60 flights in order to treat passengers who needed immediate medical care.



Marcia Le Roux, Executive Head: Medical and Travel, Europ Assistance South Africa

Le Roux states that it is now a requirement for airlines to have some form of inflight medical capabilities as well as have medical kits and automatic defibrillators on board for all flights. “This is due to the high incident rate of medical emergencies aboard aircraft as well as the massive cost involved to divert or re-route a single flight.”

“The cost of re-routing a flight can escalate quickly when one considers all the related costs including the cost of having to re-book flights for all the other passengers who might then be stranded in a place that is not their desired destination, arranging the safe transfer and arrival of all the passengers’ luggage, and providing food and accommodation for passengers if necessary,” she says.

Le Roux explains that the training and equipment standards for airline crew are in place to allow the crew members to respond to rare or very serious incidents as well as the more frequent type of incidents. “Some of the more frequent reasons for passengers asking the crew for medical help include conditions such as gastrointestinal problems, ear, nose or throat problems, weakness or near fainting.”

Competent medical assistance

If the assistance within the crew’s capabilities is not sufficient, help could be requested from the airline’s medical assistance provider – who will then assist the captain in his or her decision to divert the aircraft. She states that many airlines have a contract in place with an on the ground-based medical assistance provider who will provide help to the flight crew to assist a person in need of medical care, as soon as the aircraft lands.

“There are also various instances where passengers who happen to be healthcare professionals offer their assistance during a medical issue. An example of such an occurrence happened recently to a senior Europ Assistance medical doctor who was on board a recent flight from Johannesburg to Europe when a middle-aged passenger had a major cardiac emergency. The passenger was kept alive by the doctor with the medical drugs available on board and the help of the trained airline staff until the pilot could re-route the flight to an airport where the emergency medical services could transfer the patient to be specialised at a hospital,” says Le Roux.

“Luckily for travellers who suffer from unpleasant symptoms, these issues can be prevented with simple measures and the crew is capable of providing basic medical assistance to alleviate the symptoms.

“While travellers can be assured that there is competent assistance available in case of medical emergencies on board a flight, anyone who suffers from an underlying disease must make sure that they are stable to fly and inform the airline of the medical issues, before undertaking long-distance travelling to avoid any undue risks,” she concludes.

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