

Questions rise over sleep apnea's role in Hoboken train crash

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Indications that the train engineer in September's deadly Hoboken crash may have had sleep apnea could raise questions over how effectively transportation agencies screen their employees.

A lawyer for engineer Thomas Gallagher, 48, said Thursday that his client recently was diagnosed with "severe" sleep apnea and sent test results to the federal agency investigating the crash. Gallagher's attorney, Jack Arseneault, noted that an NJ Transit physician found him fit for duty as recently as July.

"The diagnosis made sense to him because his recollection of the

See SLEEP, Page 6A

crash was as he approached the station his speed was 10 mph, he sounded the horn, rang the bell, and the next thing he remembers was being on the floor of the cab," Arseneault said.

A spokesman for the National Transportation Safety Board investigating the Sept. 29 crash would not confirm whether the engineer has the disorder, but said "examining the medical fitness of transportation workers involved in accidents is part of our investigative process."

The NTSB was made aware of the findings Oct. 31, Arseneault said.

NTSB spokesman Christopher T. O'Neil said the investigation also includes "examining if declared or undiagnosed conditions were being adequately tested." He referred all questions about the testing of engineers to NJ Transit.

An NJ Transit spokesman said engineers are "screened" for sleep apnea but would not elaborate.

"Under federal rules, NJ Transit cannot discuss any specifics surrounding the accident," agency spokeswoman Lisa Torbic said. "NJ Transit is not authorized to discuss any employee's medical or personal information."

Undiagnosed apnea has been blamed for several national catastrophes, including the 2013 derailment of a Metro-North train in the Bronx that killed four people and injured 70.

Several North Jersey sleep experts said they detected undiagnosed sleep apnea in the Hoboken crash and noted that in 90 percent of cases, the illness is never confirmed by a physician.



“It’s the first thing I thought of when I read about the accident,” said Dr. Jeffrey Barasch, medical director of The Valley Hospital Center for Sleep Medicine in Ridgewood. “It’s very prevalent. We’re talking 5 to 7 percent of men who are overwhelmingly undiagnosed.”

About 4 percent of women are diagnosed, he said.

“The only positive thing is now it’s calling more attention to something that’s an ongoing problem in transportation,” Barasch said.

Barasch and other physicians questioned the rigor of the screening, which typically consists of assessing an engineer’s weight, body mass-index and neck circumference – the larger the results, the greater likelihood of apnea.

Experts say two-thirds of patients suffering from apnea are obese.

It’s far from a conclusive diagnosis, however. The gold standard is still an overnight stay in a sleep lab, in which an electrocardiogram is performed; brain waves, respiration rates, oxygen levels, muscle tone and eye movements are monitored through leads placed on the body.

“It’s a serious condition, as serious as high blood pressure or diabetes,” said Dr. Theophanis Pavlou, a sleep expert at Holy Name Medical Center in Teaneck.

“The overnight stay gives the best results,” he said.

Increasingly, however, insurance is not likely to pay for the test, which can cost \$2,000 to \$3,000, even if insurers are only paying half that, experts say.

The result? More people are being sent home with less sophisticated testing that is not as effective, physicians say.

Barasch said he has had engineers ask for the test because they suspected their drowsiness could be deadly on the job.

“It’s an appalling situation when the operator of a train needs a test and their insurance won’t cover it; they say it’s a safety issue, not a health issue, if you can imagine,” Barasch said.

The good news? Those diagnosed often see good results with proper treatment – a lowering of blood pressure, Pavlou said. Even 10 points can make a difference, he said.

The standard of care remains continuous positive airway pressure, which is delivered through a small machine attached to a mask the patient wears, he said.

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About sleep apnea

» Affects more than 18 million Americans.

» Causes interrupted breathing during sleep.

» Leads to increased risk for heart disease and stroke.

» Leaves people drowsy or dosing off during the day.