Op-ed: Why should airline pilots be exempt from the vaccine requirement?

By SHELDON H. JACOBSON
CHICAGO TRIBUNE  |  OCT 04, 2021

Opinion content—editorials, columns and guest commentaries—is created independent of news reporting and is exclusive to subscribers.
With President Joe Biden’s sweeping COVID-19 vaccine mandate set to take hold across the public and private sectors, numerous groups are bracing for a fight to gain vaccine exemptions for their constituents.

The Allied Pilots Association, the union representing American Airlines pilots, is arguing for an exemption for their pilots based on work schedule demands and circumstances that they believe are unique to air pilots. The Southwest Airlines Pilots Association has joined this effort. Their arguments are long on emotion but short on substance. In contrast, the Air Line Pilots Association, represents United Airlines pilots, supports pilot vaccination as part of a “multi-layered approach” to combat the virus.
The APA warns of possible **pilot shortages** during the upcoming holiday season if pilot vaccination is mandated.

Inciting public fear for something that is over seven weeks in the future, and might never happen, is Machiavellian. Moreover, with the **majority of pilots already vaccinated**, no pilot shortages have already occurred, and if there was such a shortage during the holidays, it most likely would be caused by the delay in vaccinations, not by the vaccinations themselves.

The vaccines have proven to be remarkably safe, with any deleterious side effects typically resolving within a few days. The “unique issues” cited by the APA are exceedingly rare and a nonissue provided vaccinations occur long before pilots are required to operate an aircraft.
The same arguments used by the APA apply to flight attendants, whose primary role is passenger safety.

Other occupations that can use similar arguments are interstate truck drivers, train engineers, and public transportation workers.

The alternative to vaccines is weekly testing, which the APA cites as a viable alternative, and would be even more burdensome to the pilots.

The problem with weekly testing is that it only provides a snapshot of infection status. This means that a person could test negative on one day, get infected the following day, and spread the virus within three days of being tested. In such cases, the negative test offers no public health benefits, particularly if the person is asymptomatic or has very mild symptoms, but could still spread the virus.

Religious exemptions have also become popular avenues to avoid vaccination. Yet, it is unclear what a religious exemption means, and how it can be assessed.

The Roman Catholic Church has been clear that vaccination is well within its doctrine of belief. No other major religious bodies have offered written documentation or scripture that would preclude a person from vaccination.

What the Biden mandate should have required is twice-weekly testing. Moreover, the cost of such tests could have been borne by the individual or the company employing the individual. Given that the government is offering widely available vaccines at no cost, replacing this one-time cost with ongoing testing costs is bad economics, strains the available test capacity, and is less effective to squelch the spread of the virus.

Numerous airlines are taking steps to encourage vaccination. Delta Air Lines imposed a monthly $200 health insurance premium for those unvaccinated. United Airlines is putting even unvaccinated employees who have requested
exemptions on temporary unpaid leave. American Airlines has taken a more passive approach, simply urging vaccination for their employees.

It is unfortunate that vaccine mandates are necessary. They are distasteful and demeaning. In an ideal world, the spirit of altruism and patriotism would prevail, making the case for all to be vaccinated. Given that such an ideal world only exist in novels, movies and dreams, we will need to live with the politics of mandates and exemptions, affecting everyone while pleasing no one.

Sheldon H. Jacobson is professor of computer science at the University of Illinois.

Submit a letter, of no more than 400 words, to the editor here or email letters@chicagotribune.com.