MEETING REPORT

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REPORT FROM THE 35TH CONFERENCE OF THE EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR AVIATION PSYCHOLOGY (EAAP)

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Report: The 35th Conference of the European Association for Aviation Psychology (EAAP) took place in Athens from September 23 to 26, 2024. This prestigious event serves as a key gathering for professionals specializing in aviation psychology, human factors, and flight safety. It brings together a diverse range of experts, including aviation psychologists, pilots, air traffic controllers, and other specialists whose work is crucial to maintaining and improving aviation safety standards.

This year, according to the conference organizers, approximately 300 participants attended from various sectors of both civil and military aviation. The conference not only attracts professionals from across Europe but also welcomes attendees from other regions, including the United States, Australia, and Asia. It provided an invaluable platform for knowledge exchange, professional networking, and discussions on the latest research and advancements in aviation psychology. One of the highlights of the event was the opportunity to hear insightful presentations from experts, including psychologists from the U.S. Air Force (USAF) and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), who shared their latest findings on critical aspects of human performance in aviation.

Participation in the EAAP conference is essential for professionals seeking to stay up to date with current trends and research in aviation psychology. Additionally, for those working toward or maintaining EAAP accreditation in aviation psychology, attending the conference is a key requirement. From both an academic and practical standpoint, the event plays a significant role in fostering professional development and enhancing expertise in aviation psychology.

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During the conference, I had the privilege of presenting research conducted by our team at the Department of Aviation Psychology (Biernacki, Banaszek, Łapkiewicz, and Zieliński) under the title Do Senior Pilots Get Older? This study focused on examining changes in cognitive and motor functions among senior pilots, addressing critical questions related to aging and its potential impact on flight performance. By investigating these factors, our research aimed to contribute valuable insights into pilot longevity, safety, and training methodologies, ensuring that aviation professionals remain capable and effective throughout their careers. The assessment of cognitive ability and psychomotor function plays a crucial role in evaluating a pilot's fitness to fly. These evaluations occur both during initial screening and in follow-up assessments throughout a pilot's career. However, as individuals age and undergo the natural aging process of the central nervous system, there is a gradual decline in these cognitive and motor functions. This decline typically manifests in longer reaction times, reduced executive control, diminished working memory capacity, and decreased attentional processes. Research conducted on the general population suggests that these cognitive and psychomotor declines become more pronounced around the age of 60 and continue to progress with age. This raises an important question: Does this pattern of decline also occur among older pilots? The relevance of this question has grown in recent years, as aging populations have led to extended career longevity across various professions, including aviation. Given that pilots constitute a highly selected, rigorously trained professional group, this issue takes on particular significance. On one hand, experienced pilots may remain valuable assets to employers due to their extensive knowledge, accumulated expertise, and decision-making skills. On the other hand, any deterioration in cognitive and motor functions could pose significant risks, potentially affecting their ability to perform safe flight operations. This study aimed to explore these concerns by examining a group of 19 helicopter pilots working in Helicopter Emergency Medical Services (HEMS).

At the beginning of the study, all participants were 60 years old. Their cognitive and psychomotor functions were assessed annually over three consecutive years. A range of variables related to cognitive efficiency and psychomotor performance were measured using indicators from the Vienna Test System (Schuhfried, GmbH), a widely recognized tool for psychological and neuropsychological assessment in aviation. The data were analyzed using a linear mixed model framework to identify potential age-related trends. Interestingly, the analysis did not reveal any significant cognitive or motor function decline over the three-year period. The overall performance levels remained stable throughout the study, with minimal variability between individuals in terms of time-related trends. These findings suggest that pilots represent a pre-selected population whose cognitive and psychomotor abilities remain continuously engaged and reinforced due to the nature of their professional activities. The demanding cognitive and motor tasks associated with piloting may contribute to maintaining their functional capacity, even in later stages of their careers. In summary, while aging is generally associated with cognitive and psychomotor decline, this study provides evidence that highly trained pilots may exhibit resilience against such changes, likely due to ongoing cognitive engagement and skill reinforcement. These findings have important implications for policies regarding age-related limitations in aviation, highlighting the need for individualized assessments rather than rigid age-based restrictions.

The 35th EAAP Conference was an enriching experience, reinforcing the critical role of psychology in aviation safety and performance. The insights gained will inform future research and professional practice, particularly in the areas of pilot aging, cognitive function, and training development. Continued participation in such events is essential for staying at the forefront of aviation psychology and contributing to advancements in the field.

AUTHORS' DECLARATION

Manuscript preparation: Marcin Biernacki. The Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.