

Aerotoxic Syndrome – An Unknown Danger To Everyone Who Flies?

Ex-Professional dancer Chriselda Barretto joined the Aviation industry to fulfil her dream of seeing the world – but the health issues she experienced means she now wants to warn everyone about the dangers of frequent flying.

CHRISELDA.BLOG



Chriselda Barretto



Brussel, Oct 9, 2019 (Issuewire.com) - It felt like she was trapped in a zombie-like state, as she battled heart palpitations, extreme fatigue, breathing problems, muscle weakness and an attention span so short she couldn't even complete a page of a book.

Chriselda Barretto had a taste of the world as a professional modern jazz-ballet dancer and hoped a job as an in-flight safety instructor would allow her to keep experiencing new countries and cultures around the globe.

The exciting role did create many new memories, but it also robbed her of some existing ones, while bringing a raft of health issues, both short-term and long-term.

Not once in her 20-year aviation career did she hear the term Aerotoxic Syndrome – but she now believes it had a massive impact on her and former colleagues and is something the estimated 22 million people who take to the air each day for business and pleasure need to be aware of.

“It doesn't only affect aviation employees but people who fly frequently,” she said.

“It is critical people know the problem exists so they can either insist changes are made in the aviation

industry or take care not to be overly exposed to these environmental conditions.”

The term Aerotoxic Syndrome was first coined in 2000 to describe claims of short-term and long-term health effects caused by breathing airliner cabin air – alleged to have been contaminated with atomized engine oils or other chemicals.

A year-long Australian senate investigation found evidence of about 20 crew members making successful claims for compensation after becoming ill from oil fumes leaking into the cabin while many other probes have taken place around the world into various incidents.

However, in the UK, a House of Lords Science and Technology committee found claims unsubstantiated while it is not recognized in medicine.

Chriselda is determined to challenge that and recently published [Aviation Stories 1: Dying to Fly](#), fiction based on fact, which explores the often taboo subject, and describes a fume-event; the cabin filling with an “odorous, smoky grey fog” so bad it set off the onboard smoke alarm, in one scene.

Long after leaving the profession, protagonist Ellen meets former colleagues who are struggling with health issues, posing the question of whether aviation employees are the canaries in the coal mines for the industry?

“I tried writing a book, but I realized that if I wanted to create more awareness amongst the crew community, then they probably wouldn’t ever have the capacity of concentration to read it,” Chriselda said.

“So I decided to try another way, with a podcast - ["The 3 Pillars"](#). I think this move paid off because it reached quicker and was simpler for them to follow.”

“Now as I realize, the problem isn’t only for crew but also passengers and frequent flyers. They are just as susceptible to the toxic fumes that enter the passenger cabin through the bleed air. My journey has just started.”

“Training crew for so long only left me feeling responsible that I sent them out believing they were safe to fly when in reality they were far from it! So I vowed to do all that I could in my power to rectify this and create awareness amongst them.”

Chriselda launched the online SHIFT (Sharing Helpful Information for Tomorrow) tool, which allows people to share their experiences and advice, while she also records regular podcasts (The 3 Pillars) with Aerotoxic Syndrome survivors and experts, including research psychologist [Daniel Dumalin](#), where they discuss his work on the topic.

This includes his finding that permanent brain damage in the areas that control cognitive processes can be suffered among pilots and cabin crew.

About 196,000 passengers a year visit a GP with symptoms that could stem from fumes they have been exposed to on a plane, he also suggests.

Chriselda said she has been “shocked and concerned” with some of the stories she has heard from cabin crew who have contacted her through SHIFT.

“Amongst them, a young female attendant that had only just started her career in aviation, who suddenly couldn’t feel her legs anymore and had to drag herself to the front of the cabin during passenger boarding to seek help from the senior purser,” she said.

“She is just 23 and her life has drastically changed. Presently on sick leave, doctors can’t explain what is wrong with her, but she suffers severe neurological problems, memory loss, sensitivity to sound, depression and chemical insensitivity.”

“She wants to fly again but understands she probably never will. Sitting in front of a computer/screen for a couple of minutes gives her severe headaches and she can’t concentrate.”

“Even using normal cleaning products is impossible as the chemicals in them make her severely dizzy and nauseous.”

Having been brought up by Anglo-Indian and Portuguese-Goan parents in Mumbai, India, Chriselda had always been curious about the wider world, from the mixture of influences she was exposed to - British conservatism meeting laid-back Mediterranean attitudes and the experience of attending the all-girl Sophia College.

“At school, even though it was a Catholic convent, we mingled with many different religious types: Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and Punjabis,” Chriselda said.

“I find that aspect to be really beautiful where you have different communities living and working together, peacefully with innate respect towards each other.”

Mumbai is perhaps a city of extremes, with a huge educational and class divide, and rich and poor living together yet worlds apart in most aspects of their lives.

Chriselda's mother insisted she make the most of the opportunities she had, which led her to follow classical Indian dancing “Bharatanatyam” for 10 years and then on to Modern Jazz Ballet – which was when she started working with well-known choreographers like Shiamak Davar and Zoobin Surty, joining their troupe for stage shows and having her first taste of globe-trotting.

“We toured like crazy, all over India and then abroad to Fiji, South Africa... I also at the time did a cameo appearance in a music video for Remo Fernandes on MTV,” Chriselda said.

“My mother had one condition that I kept doing well at college, in exchange for this busy well-paying side-life that I had. I kept my part of the deal and enjoyed many years as a professional dancer. I think it is from here that my love for travelling actually started.”

Chemistry/ Microbiology was her chosen path, but by now she had been bitten by the travel bug and looking at microscopic images in the laboratory seemed boring in comparison to her daydreams about foreign lands.

It was then a friend suggested the aviation industry and she applied widely before landing her first job with Damania Airways when she was 19.

Chriselda moved to Belgium and progressed quickly to work as a Cabin Safety Training Instructor, loving the adrenaline rush she got from speaking in front of people and realising she had found another passion on top of dancing and aviation.

“That was so much fun and the entire safety training and drills were so interesting,” she said.

“I always wished to have an emergency, just so that I could prove how drilled and focused I was with all the different emergency drills and procedures.”

Young and free-spirited, perhaps she could afford to approach on-board health and safety in a relaxed manner.

However, in 20 years travelling the globe, immersing herself in aspects of flight safety such as first aid, oxygen, evacuation techniques and onboard survival, it is perhaps ironic that there was one danger Chriselda did not hear mentioned once.

She left the aviation industry in 2015 and it wasn't until 2017 that she first became aware of Aerotoxic Syndrome, and was able to start explaining the problems that had affected her and a number of former colleagues.

Chriselda said: “I clearly recall the zombie-like state after a flight, where you would be physically present but mentally gone, void of any thought.”

“Not to forget the difficulty in trying to hold a normal conversation where your mind is lagging, trying to find the words and not succeeding.”

“It is as if you awake after an entire night's sleep and still feel so tired at the start of the next day.”

While Chriselda has now settled in Zemst, which is in the Flemish area of Belgium, travel is still central to her life, but it is journeys she tries to take readers on in the 12 books she has had published, that cover poetry, romance, the supernatural and horror.

She never could have imagined writing a single page of anything while she worked in aviation, but now years later, progressively she finds her mind has recuperated and rediscovered its previous capacity.

“My travels have opened me up to a lot of different kinds of people, mindsets, places, cultures, stories and situations,” Chriselda said.

“I travel a lot in my mind, using my creativity and inner vision. I try to incorporate my emotions and feelings into each poem or story that I write.”

Trying to better understand her own journey has also led Chriselda to practice mindfulness.

Being a life coach, she does what she has done her own life, whether it was at home in Mumbai, while working as a Safety Instructor or traveling the world as cabin crew – and that is listening to the stories of people from a wide variety of backgrounds, trying to empathise and understand what they are going through, which in turn, helps her better understand herself.

Chriselda, who speaks English, Flemish, French, Hindi and Greek, is also working on her next book – on image building, a guide to help de-stress in a work-orientated, fast-paced society.

One of her mantras is “Simplifying your life is an art; a conscious effort”, but Aerotoxic Syndrome is a part of the journey she was not prepared for and now wants to make sure as many people as possible are aware it even exists and can better understand its effect on them.

“It took me 20-odd years to hear about Aerotoxic Syndrome and under 90 seconds to realise it was true,” she added.

“I just want people involved in the industry and outside to read about the symptoms and then speak to me.”

Find out more about Chriselda at chriselda.blog



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