



Assessing fitness to drive

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Case history

Joe, a 30 year old commercial petrol tanker driver, has been previously well but seeks your advice regarding two 'blackouts' he experienced at home where he fell to the floor unconscious for a few minutes. His wife observed no evidence of a seizure and his cardiovascular and neurological status are normal on examination. You commence a series of investigations to determine the cause.

Question 1

What do you advise Joe regarding driving?

- A. he must stop driving petrol tankers and the family car immediately
- B. he may continue to drive, but must see you if there is a recurrence
- C. he must stop driving the tanker, but may drive the family car locally
- D. he must stop driving and you will notify the DLA
- E. he must stop driving and you will notify his employer.

Question 2

Extensive investigation shows Joe has a heart block causing his blackouts. It is successfully treated with a pacemaker:

- A. he can resume commercial driving immediately
- B. he can resume commercial driving after 12 months
- C. he can resume commercial driving after assessment by a cardiologist and subject to periodic review
- D. he is unsuitable for future commercial driving and should be advised to seek another vocation.

Question 3

Joe's employer is not happy about Joe driving again with a conditional licence and sacks him. Joe seeks your assistance. What do you advise?

- A. the employer is right to put public safety before Joe's livelihood
- B. the employer should employ Joe on alternative duties in the depot
- C. the employer is in the wrong because a conditional licence entitles Joe to drive a commercial vehicle
- D. Joe should speak to the DLA.

Question 4

After 10 years satisfactory driving and cardiac monitoring, Joe asks if he can resume an unconditional licence. You advise:

- A. once on a conditional licence, always on a conditional licence
- B. he should wait another five years for review
- C. it is possible for persons with stable, well treated conditions to seek medical opinion to resume a full licence
- D. you will write a letter of support now.

Answers

1. Answer C

'Blackouts' may be the harbinger of serious illnesses such as epilepsy or cardiac causes which may impact on road safety. They require investigation and referral as necessary to establish a clear diagnosis. In the interim, the driver of a commercial vehicle should be advised to stop driving while investigations are being carried out. It is not necessary for the patient to inform the DLA at this time because any diagnosis has yet to be established. The GP does not need to

notify the DLA if the driver heeds advice. The driving of the family car will depend on circumstances including the level of clinical suspicion and the extent to which any driving is needed. The GP does not need to notify the employer because it would break confidentiality. It is the patient's responsibility to discuss fitness to work with the employer although an explanatory note may be provided for the patient to give to the employer.

2. Answer C

Joe has an obligation to inform the DLA of his condition because a commercial driver who has a pacemaker does not meet the criteria for an unconditional licence. Recommendations for a conditional licence for commercial vehicle driving may be made by a relevant specialist. In this case the treating cardiologist may write a letter of support for Joe's application for a conditional licence if the response to treatment is good and the risk lowered to near normal levels. The letter should include a statement of the disorder, if the response to treatment is satisfactory, and the suggested interval to review fitness to retain a conditional licence (if one is granted). The duration of time Joe will be off the road needs to be determined by the cardiologist. The DLA is responsible for determining if a conditional licence will be issued.

3. Answer C

Joe is entitled to drive commercial vehicles as licensed by the DLA. The employer is not justified in dismissing a person with a disability whose conditional licence has been granted. Joe may request the DLA to intervene or refer the matter to the Equal Employment Opportunity tribunal.

4. Answer C

It is possible for patients on a conditional licence who have responded well to treatment and whose prognosis is good to be reviewed for a full licence. This may apply to some persons with pacemakers, but will be influenced by the underlying disease, number of stable years and the nature of driving duties.

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