

EDITORIAL: Germanwings' lesson: No pilot should fly alone



Passengers watch candles and flowers for the victims of the plane crash at the airport in Dusseldorf , Germany, on Tuesday, March 31, 2015. One week ago 150 people died in the Germanwings airliner crash in the French alps from Barcelona to Duesseldorf.

MARTIN MEISSNER — AP Photo

It's hard to draw lessons from a tragedy as singular the Germanwings disaster. But as revelations emerge about the co-pilot's mental health problems, one takeaway is clear: He shouldn't have been in that cockpit alone.

On Monday, prosecutors in Germany said Andreas Lubitz had been treated for "suicidal tendencies" before getting his pilot's license. On Tuesday, Germanwings' parent company, Lufthansa, said he had suffered from a "deep depressive episode" in 2009, and told them about it.

Evidence recovered from his apartment last week indicated that his mental health issues had persisted. A torn-up sick note deemed him unfit for work on the day of the crash, and other medical records showed that a complaint about his vision had been diagnosed as psychosomatic.

Prosecutors believe that on March 24, possibly distraught at the potential loss of his job to a diagnosis involving mental illness, the 27-year-old Lubitz waited until the plane's older pilot left the cockpit. Then he locked him out and intentionally crashed the jet into the French Alps.

Amid worldwide grief — the 150 casualties came from more than a dozen countries including the U.S. — the prevailing question, as always, is whether this awful incident could have been avoided.

Some have suggested better mental health screening. Others have called for a rollback of the cockpit security measures implemented after 9/11 making the doors easier to open. Some see the crash as such an outlier that nothing could have been done about it. The accident rate for global jet travel was about 1 in 4.4 million flights in

2014, according to the International Air Transport Association. Statistically, air travel is safer than it has ever been.

We have long held that mental health care should, in fact, be as routine and ongoing as any other kind of health care, and not just for airline pilots. But until that happens, intensified screening could drive stressed-out pilots underground if they fear that one bad day could cost them their careers.

What does make sense, though, is insisting that no commercial cockpit ever be left in the hands of just one person. Even if a co-pilot is bent on suicide, having a body in the next seat can help.

Why? Because, according to The New England Journal of Medicine, up to 80% of suicides are committed on impulse. One 2001 study found that a quarter of those who had unsuccessfully tried suicide made their decision to die less than five minutes before making the attempt, and 70% had mulled it for less than an hour.

But the urge passes. A 1978 study of people stopped from jumping off of the Golden Gate Bridge found that 94% were still alive more than 26 years later, and interviews with survivors say they almost instantly regretted jumping. A second person in the cockpit could curb or delay an impulse, or step in more forcefully if matters became urgent. It is perhaps the world's oldest solution to human frailty — the buddy system — and it works.

The U.S. has long required airlines to have two crew members in the cockpit at all times as a precaution, and in the wake of the Germanwings crash, some European countries and airlines, including Lufthansa, have followed suit. As the search continues, both for remains and for causes and solutions, this so-called “rule of two” should be a worldwide requirement.