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Airliner Covid Risk Depends on Source

“An individual has a much greater chance of being hit by lightning over a 12-month period than catching Covid-19 during a commercial flight” heralds a press release from a respected source. Statistically that should be the green light for passengers to return to the airlines, especially given that those words came from the Director General and CEO of an international organization that’s been around since 1945. The statement was even based on Covid cases summarized by their own in-house Medical Advisor.

Clearly this hasn’t caused a public stampede back to the airport terminal. Perhaps that has something to do with the source of the comment being the International Air Transport Association (IATA), the lobbying group for some 290 airlines in 120 countries.

A joint publication by completely different parties concludes that sitting side-by-side on an airliner is equally as safe as maintaining a 6 foot distance on the ground, and when compared to an office conference room it’s equivalent to being a full 7 feet apart. It adds “The cabin of a commercial aircraft is one of the safer spaces available anywhere during this pandemic.”

The authors of this conclusion were those who were directly impacted by the pandemic travel bonk - Airbus, Boeing and Embraer.

It’s understood that it’s an industry association’s duty to advocate for its constituents. IATA is just doing its job, and airline manufacturers want to sell airplanes. But are such claims, while perhaps valid for the inflight portion of one’s trip, doing airline passengers a disservice?

According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC) “Air travel requires spending time in security lines and airport terminals, which can bring you in close contact with other people and frequently touched surfaces. Most viruses and other germs do not spread easily on flights because of how air circulates and is filtered on airplanes. However, social distancing is difficult on crowded flights, and sitting within 6 feet of others, sometimes for hours, may increase your risk of getting Covid-19.”

This statement in part supports the airline industry’s case of beneficial cabin air circulation, but then tempers it by noting other risks such as the airport environment and the inability to always sit far enough away from fellow passengers. It would seem the IATA and manufacturers cherry pick facts to fit their narrative, which is understandable given the industry’s dire situation. However, without a complete picture the flying public is unable to make an informed decision on whether air travel is within their personal comfort zone.

IATA’s CEO continues “As always, airlines, manufacturers and every entity involved in aviation will be guided by science and global best practices to keep flying safe for passengers and crew.” Frankly the “Guided by science” claim has become worn out this year, favored by politicians without specific proof of their arguments. After all, who can argue with science?

The spin doctors can say what they may, but until there’s a vaccine and indisputable CDC evidence that it’s safe to travel door-to-door rather than just gate-to-gate, any form of public transportation poses a higher risk than staying at home. Given the continued depressed dismal airline traffic figures, it would seem that the public gets that.

About Brian Foley Associates (BRiFO)

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