

## Medical Pilot

AS A SENIOR AVIATION MEDICAL examiner I receive a good number of inquiries about FAA medical certification from prospective pilots. In most cases I'm able to tell these aviation-minded people that they will have no problem getting a medical certificate. But in some cases the answer—and outcome—is not so clear.

A young man who wanted to be a pilot called and related that his family has a rare condition, hypokalemic periodic paralysis, that he said is due to a low blood potassium level. He said he went on a pizza and soda binge nine years ago with his high school buddies, and the next day he woke up with weakness in his hands and arms. He stayed in bed and took a potassium supplement hourly, and after about four hours his spell ended.

He said he had not had any more of these spells since, and he knows that he must not go on binges any more. He's been under the care of a neurologist at the University of Minnesota, who has him on a strict diet.

The young man said he'd previously applied for an airman medical certificate, but the FAA Aeromedical Branch in Oklahoma City had denied his applications. Could I help get him a medical certificate? He wanted to fly!

Unfamiliar with the condition, I told the prospective pilot that I'd have to hit the books and get back to him. I learned that this uncommon disease causes a person possessing normal strength to suddenly become weak. It is mainly an inherited condition described as autosomal dominant, meaning there's a one in two chance that this disease will be

# Second Effort

**Trying one more time earns medical certification**

DR. WILLIAM A. SCHMIDT

passed on to the next generation.

Each affected person will have an affected parent, and in this case it was the young man's mother. (Generally, this disease is found in men, not women.) The attacks of weakness are usually seen in the younger person, and it's rare to see this disease present after the age of 25.

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Meals high in carbohydrate or sodium may trigger the paralysis, and the attacks may occur daily—or may not be seen for years! The paralysis happens exactly as described by the prospective pilot. It starts in the outer limbs (hands or feet), and it can progress proximally (spread toward the trunk). The treatment is the use of oral potassium chloride salts every 15 to 30 minutes until the weakness goes away.

After sharing this information with the young man, I opined that

he should be able to obtain an FAA medical certificate since he'd had no weakness or a paralytic spell for so many years.

Several months later this chap came to my office. He wanted to fly! Standing 6-foot-3 and balancing the scale at 254 pounds, this fellow was not a weak type. As is typical of this disease, his examination was entirely normal. His strength was normal. His reflexes were slightly decreased in his arms, but they were the same on the left side as on the right side. He had brought his medical record from his treating neurologist, and it reflected how well the man followed his neurologist's instructions for dietary control of his disease.

He was taking a carbonic anhydrase inhibitor diuretic drug, Daranide (dichlorophenamide), that decreased the pressure within the eye. Generally used to treat glaucoma, this drug had a helpful side effect for his disease. Glaucoma patients usually take one tablet three times a day; this young man took only one pill at night. Because this medication created no debilitating side effects, I didn't think it should disqualify this prospective pilot from getting a medical certificate.

Taking the next step, I called Dr. Warren Silberman, chief of the FAA Aeromedical Certification Division in Oklahoma City, and we discussed the young man's condition. Silberman asked me to fax him some data from the neurologist. He said he would discuss the condition with his colleagues, but that I could be "cautiously optimistic" to this applicant about his possible medical certification.

In their round-table discussion

about this condition the FAA doctors in Oklahoma City approved the young man's application for a third-class medical certificate. And they

*Dr. Warren*

*Silberman, chief of the FAA Aeromedical Certification Division, said he would discuss the condition with his colleagues, but that I could be "cautiously optimistic."*

gave me the opportunity to do something I enjoy very much, calling an applicant and telling him the good news—and to go fly.

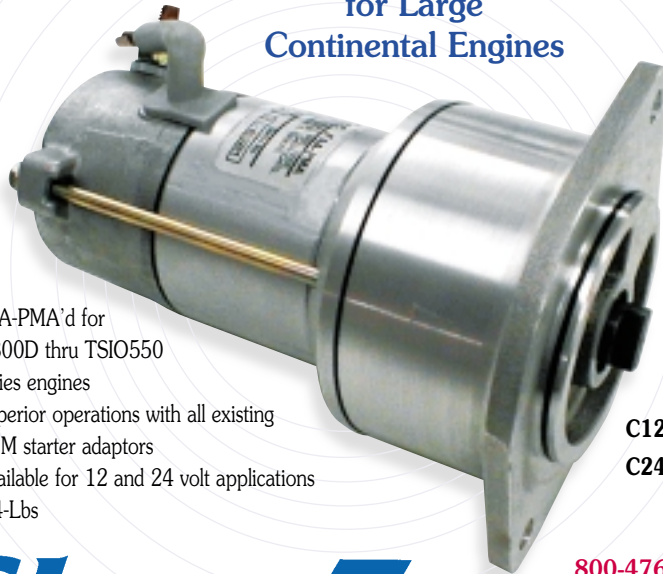
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**Editor's Note:** Hypokalemic periodic paralysis is a rare neurological disorder, and a neurologist may encounter only several patients with this in his or her entire career, says Dr. Jack Hastings, a neurologist and chairman of the EAA Aeromedical Council. While rare, this young man's story proves that when it comes to flying, don't give up after the first denial. With a little extra effort, and the help of an EAA AME Pilot Advocate, your dreams of flight may, indeed, be possible. For more information, visit the members-only page of the EAA website at [www.eaa.org](http://www.eaa.org) or call 888/322-4636, Ext. 4821.—*Scott*



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