



Drug Abuse Among Truck Drivers

By Larry Yellen, FOX Chicago News

November 10, 2009

Chicago - Truck drivers might be using drugs to stay alert, or to relieve stress during long, lonely trips. And because of drug abuse, there are more strict drug-testing programs throughout the industry.

But a Fox Chicago investigation suggests many companies, and their drivers, have yet to get the message.

Almost every driver has felt the fear. You're in control, but what about that big semi in the rear view mirror?

One eyewitness to a crash said, " I looked though my mirror and I seen that semi just sliding."

Sliding then crashing into 22 cars at the Chicago Skyway Toll Plaza. As seen in our never-before aired video, an 80,000 pound truck veers right, then jackknifes, and crashes, causing multiple injuries.

Another eyewitness said, "Some cars were underneath the semis. I was just glad that we just got out."

The trucker had fallen asleep, and later tested positive for cocaine. The company that employed him had a history of failing to conduct legally-required drug tests.

"It is their responsibility to have active and ongoing testing programs at all times. These trucking companies are playing Russian roulette with us," said Kenneth Allen, the attorney who represents some of the victims in the crash.

A Fox Chicago News investigation found that in the last four years, the federal government fined 120 Illinois trucking companies for not doing random drug tests.

Another 55 companies failed to test newly-hired drivers. Fourteen companies failed to make sure that drivers were tested for drugs after serious accidents. And nine companies put drivers on the road even though they had flunked their drug tests.

"This is a safety epidemic that no one really understands," said Michigan attorney Steven Gursten, who specializes in trucking cases.

Gursten said truckers and their bosses would rather pay a small fine for skipping a drug test after an accident, than pay a multi-million dollar verdict if the driver gets tested and turns out to be high.

So drivers, Gursten said, sometimes avoid their post-accident drug tests by just making sure they can't be found.

"I see it happen all the time. I see it happen in case after case. And it's always the same story. They always say I was too upset by the truck accident. I had to be consoled," Gursten said.

Rich Donovan was an IDOT minuteman when he suffered severe leg and chest injuries when a poultry delivery truck swerved onto the shoulder of the Dan Ryan.

"I remember nothing but a big bang (snaps) and lights out," Donovan said.

Donovan was helping a motorist change a flat tire.

"There are a lot of things that I can't do that I used to do. And I'm 40 years old! " Donovan said.

The trucker testified that he had no idea he was supposed to submit to a drug test after the accident, which occurred on a Saturday afternoon. And so on Monday, he was working for another company.

Paul O'toole, who represents Rich Donovan, disagrees with that testimony.

"It's in the interest of a driver who knows he has ingested marijuana or coke or beer not to get tested. It's the fox watching the hen house," O'toole said.

When the trucker was finally tested, two days later, he tested positive for cocaine and marijuana. But here's the twist, he claimed he used the drugs on the night after the accident, not before.

O'toole said, "He basically contaminated the evidence, making it difficult to trace it back to the accident."

The trucking industry said examples of such misconduct are very rare, and that everyday drivers are far more likely to be on drugs or alcohol than truckers.

"There should be zero tolerance for that. But it's like any profession, there are those people that we have to weed out. We have to make it more difficult for them to move from one job to another, if they have a problem with drugs or alcohol," said George Billows of the Illinois Trucking Association.

On that point, former IDOT Minute Man, Rich Donovan agrees.

"That's gotta be stopped. People driving 18,000 or 40,000, or 80,000 pound trucks on drugs. That's crazy," Donovan said.