Is seafaring really becoming a less risky occupation?

Professor Mick Bloor, of the Seafarers’ International Research Centre, looks at trends relating to injuries and fatalities in the shipping industry

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N the last issue, I looked at the evidence of whether or not the dramatic changes in the last twenty years in the global shipping industry could be said to be making seafaring a more healthy occupation. The evidence was fragmentary but, on balance, it appeared that some of the changes (such as longer working hours, faster turnaround times, reducing crewing levels, split shifts) were generating ill health, particularly mental illness problems. In this issue, I shall look at the evidence of injuries and fatal accidents to see whether globalisation of the industry has made seafaring less hazardous.

The only international evidence we have on seafarers’ injuries is the insurance data on claims to the shipping industry’s various insurance associations (known as protection and indemnity clubs) for personal injuries and fatalities. An analysis of all claims from these associations shows that claims were rising in the late 1980s, but then fell in the 1990s, because this was the period when the number of claims was falling. But we should not rely on these figures, because the data is fragmentary and incomplete.

For one thing, not all serious injuries get reported: seafarers may not initially appreciate the seriousness of the accident that they have suffered. And there is a suspicion that crews from the developing world may be less likely to report an injury than developed world crews, for fear of losing their jobs or being sent home for treatment before the end of their contracts. But most importantly, crew numbers have also been falling as more modern automated ships come into service: for there to have been a real fall in injury rates we would need to establish that numbers of claims have been falling faster than the labour force has been shrinking.

Where are injuries most likely to occur? We know now that injuries and fatalities due to “ship failure” are most likely to occur on older ships (surprise, surprise!), especially those built before 1973 and 1978. We also know that injuries and fatalities are more likely to occur among ships from certain flag states: Romanian and Russian-flagged ships have high claims, but some of the flag of convenience ships are among the worst offenders (notably the Bahamas, Cyprus, Greece and Panama). If we examine the data by type of ship (and ignore
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claims from passenger ships, because many of these claims will be from passengers), then the rig and supply ships are the ones with the highest rates of injuries and fatalities. “Human error” is frequently given as the cause of injury and fatality claims. Indeed, a rising proportion of all such claims are being attributed to human error rather than, say, “ship failure”. But it would be wrong to think that “human error” implies risk-taking or other blame-worthy behaviour.

It would be wrong to think that “human error” implies risk-taking or other blame-worthy behaviour. A 1993 report suggested that 53 per cent of casualties from groundings and 38 per cent of casualties from collisions were due to “less alert look-outs” and “doodzing off during navigation.” But watch-keepers are often working excessive hours of more than twelve hours a day and their sleep patterns often watches is of poor quality because of split time and excessive noise and vibration and high seas. It is clear that any case of “human error” could be more accurately attributed to fatigue. And problems with fatigue may be increasing over time as working levels are reduced.

National statistics show similar patterns. The official statistics for England and Wales on work-related fatalities show that seafarers have higher death rates for water transport accidents than train drivers’ rates for railway accidents. Other countries’ statistics also attribute the highest rates for traffic accidents, only first deck officers had higher fatality rates.

One odd feature of national statistics on seafarers’ deaths is the very high rate of off-duty fatality injuries. Crews of British-registered ships are actually appear to suffer higher rates of injury-off-duty than on-duty. Is the most common cause of off-duty fatalities is that of falls into the dock when returning to a berthed vessel from the shore. Of course, many of these falls were alcohol-related. But does this imply that the seafarer was wholly to blame? Why should drunkenness have fatal consequences for seafarers? And why especially should drunkenness in one’s own leisure-time have fatal consequences for seafarers? Surely it should be possible to devise less hazardous access to ships and more protective barriers on docks. Boarding of ships from launches via gangways or via pilot ladders is another recognised hazard. The whole issue of crew access to ships needs more attention from designers, engineers, regulators and safety officers if seafaring is to be a less hazardous occupation.