

## THE SIRC COLUMN

# Why we should talk about swimming pools



**The protection of seafarers' mental well-being on board ship needs addressing as a matter of urgency, says Helen Sampson, director of the Seafarers' International Research Centre**

It was August and the sun was shining. I was in a beautiful city high up in a tower block where the walls were made of glass, cappuccinos were on tap, and the people were efficiently friendly. I was told there were even whales off the coast beckoning the boats of tourists amongst whom I soon planned to be with my camera and binoculars...but all was about to change. It was my own doing, entirely. I knew this as the vice president of Shipco. looked at me critically across the desk. I had raised the issue of swimming pools. "Do you have any idea what a swimming pool costs?" he asked incredulous and

outraged at my persistent pursuit of the topic? From that point on my research went less smoothly, the sky was not so blue, and the whales in the bay proved elusive!

I pursue the swimming pool issue, trying the patience of many in the industry, not because I fail to appreciate that the industry is plagued with problems and concerns such as pollution, security, supply of quality officers etc, but because I believe that, however it may seem on the surface, the topic of swimming pools is far from frivolous and indeed may be connected to some of these issues.

Swimming pools do not come cheap and this can be a particular problem when a company has "taken over" a shipbuilding contract and has to battle with a shipyard for the most basic of specification changes. If I were responsible for making the profit and loss decisions of a company, however, I have no doubt that I would prioritise pools in my decision making. Not because I have some romantic idea that seafarers should be set apart from the rest of us

and given the best of the best. Neither this, nor a muzzy-headed philanthropy drives my sense of urgency over this issue. What concerns me is the protection of mental wellbeing on board, and what I fear is that if this issue is not addressed rapidly there will be tragic consequences of one sort or another. Perhaps a major accident or incident at sea caused by poor decision making on the part of a seafarer under too much pressure. Perhaps a personal assault, a murder, or a suicide, as someone "cracks" under strain, or something more invisible: alcohol addiction; a drunken decision to escape into the transitory "buzz" of unprotected sex; experimentation with drugs? Indeed, for some seafarers and their families, the tragedy of depression, addiction, violence, sexually transmitted illness, caused by poor mental health exacerbated or produced by the living/working environment on board, may already have unfolded, remaining undocumented and unknown. So, too, could poor mental

health be an un-noted factor underlying recent accidents and incidents at sea.

The environment on board many vessels combines a fairly hazardous mixture of monotony and social isolation. Seafarers today rarely get ashore to "refresh their minds", as many of them put it, but remain at sea for long periods without respite. The jobs they undertake may be seen to be increasingly routine, in some senses "de-skilled", as "seamanship" is replaced with shore-side direction, computer control, and/or regulatory prescription. The sizes of crews have dropped, the number of people assigned to specific tasks has fallen, possibilities for social interaction aboard are limited, and in any case what might one talk about to the same faces, day in and day out, when cut off from the normal daily events that oil the wheels of social discourse ashore: the news; sporting events; new films; the gossip on your street; and so on? Added to this, ships remain predominantly single-sex working environments, with few spouses or children

accompanying seafarers let alone women seafarers. This pattern seems likely to worsen, if anything, given that employers are often even less inclined to employ women seafarers from non-traditional maritime labour supply countries such as the Philippines and Malaysia, and that spouses are understandably reluctant to sail aboard vessels which spend little time in port. As such, seafarers aboard describe life as very "hard", as very "boring", as very "monotonous" and many crave the opportunity to get ashore for a change of scene, a chance to get away from the ship, to take a mental break and get a different perspective. We all need this to retain good judgement and a sense of proportion about inconveniences, irritations, etc. It may also be that constant confinement in a monotonous, isolated environment, produces depression or other more sustained mental health problems, but that is a subject for another place and time.

Although evidence of a deterioration in mental health among seafarers may be

forthcoming (from P&I clubs for example) over the next few years, we don't really need such evidence before acting. All we need is empathy to understand the impact that the working/living environment on board today's cargo vessels is likely to have upon seafarers. The monotony and the confinement of life on board are oppressive, the inability to get away from work is potentially overwhelming, and emotional isolation from family and friends can sometimes be devastating. When we think of what shore-

dwellers need to be at our best at work: our house and garden at weekends perhaps, our pets, our children, our club, our sports activities, our fast car, our slump in front of the telly of an evening, our glass of malt, our evening at the theatre, our walk by the river or up the mountain, our dinner with friends, our night at the concert, our regular session at the pub. Whatever "it" is, we mostly can access something that we need to ameliorate the daily stresses and strains of working life, and just as we can mostly access



**'A swimming pool can transform a ship from an oppressive to an expressive space.'**

one or other of these things, seafarers mostly cannot access any of them while on contract at sea.

Swimming pools can represent the escapism, the focus of "fun", the mental break that so many seafarers today crave. Never mind that the pool cannot be used all the time, that it cannot be large enough to provide ideal physical exercise, the point of the swimming pool is that it acts on the mind, not the body. In the midst of a tedious confined environment, trapped at sea for weeks on end, the swimming pool fools the senses. It transforms the ship from an oppressive to an expressive space. It makes seafarers laugh, it makes them dream, it makes them happy. That's what's missing at sea today and it doesn't come on the back of an exercise bike or a treadmill. It's why I think we should all be talking about swimming pools and reminding shipbuilders and buyers that in contributing to the promotion of good mental health, swimming pools have the potential to fulfil a vital role on board ship today.