

Fatalities at sea: the good and the bad news

Mick Bloor, of the Seafarers International Research Centre, examines the findings of a recent survey of seafarer deaths on UK-flagged ships

Seafaring is a hazardous occupation: only fishing has a higher occupational mortality rate (that is, a higher risk of fatal injury at work) than seafaring. The Danish occupational physician Henrik Hansen calculated that Danish seafarers had a risk of fatal injury at work that was 11 times higher than that of Danish workers ashore. Stephen Roberts and Judy Williams have recently published the most comprehensive ever survey of seafarer deaths in a single maritime registry, namely those deaths on UK-flagged ships. The full report is available on the UK's Maritime & Coastguard Agency (MCA) website (www.mcga.gov.uk), but here are some of the findings.

The good news is that

the rate of seafarer fatalities at work in the UK fleet has fallen dramatically in recent years. There were 32 deaths from fatal injuries at work in the UK merchant shipping industry between 1996 and 2005: one was from a shipping disaster (an explosion), 23 were from personal occupational accidents at work and eight were from off-duty accidents at work, such as falls into the dock when boarding the ship. To compare deaths over time and between different industries, a rate is calculated of the number of deaths per 100,000 worker-years. Those 32 seafarer deaths in 1996-2005 produce a mortality rate of 12 per 100,000 seafarer-years: that rate is less than a third of the seafarer mortality rate for the preceding decade (1986-1995) and less than a quarter of the rate for the decade before that (1976-1985).

The bad news is that fatal injuries at work have fallen dramatically in all occupations in the same period, so that

seafaring remains much more hazardous than other occupations. The 1996-2005 seafarer occupational mortality rate was 12 times higher than for the general UK workforce, more than twice that of workers in the building industry and more than eight times that of manufacturing industry. This means that the 12-fold difference between UK seafarer fatalities and those in the general workforce is almost identical to the 11-fold difference that Hansen had earlier found in his Danish data. Of course, both the UK and Danish flags are recognised as "quality flags". It is hardly likely that seafarers working on ships flagged to the likes of Cambodia will have lower mortality rates. So it is unlikely that the data on UK seafarer occupational mortality are reporting much higher death rates than in the global shipping industry as a whole. Thus it appears that although safety has improved greatly in the shipping industry, it has only improved

at the same rate as in other industries ashore.

How did most of these recent fatalities occur? Well, firstly, we can say



MICK Bloor while undertaking research for SIRC.

that shipping disasters (founderings, collisions, etc) are now making only a minor contribution to seafarer fatalities. In the UK fleet, shipping disasters have claimed only two deaths since 1987, when 38 seafarers drowned in the Herald of Free Enterprise ferry disaster.

Nor are weather conditions making a large contribution: in 1996-2005 there were five deaths due to falls overboard, but only two occurred in

deaths in the UK fleet (only three dock drownings in 1996-2005), but it is unclear how much of this is due to changes in companies' alcohol policies. No doubt the reductions in shore leave, associated with reductions in turn-around times and with reductions in crewing levels, have also played their part in reducing dock drownings. Cargo handling also seems to have become much safer, with only one death occurring in 1996-2005. However, there were four deaths of seafarers struck by mooring ropes or cables, two of them on cruise ships. Unsafe working practices, inadequate training, or inadequate safety management systems are reported as being associated with many of the deaths: for example, a fall while painting a funnel without a safety harness.

Of course, not all deaths at sea occur through fatal injuries. In the same period as the 32 fatal injuries and drownings, there were 59

deaths from disease, four suicides and 22 deaths in unexplained circumstances in the UK fleet. The MCA report on deaths from disease is unilluminating because it only relates to deaths from disease on board. In the past, seafarers died in their thousands from contagious diseases – the Black Death was carried to Europe in a Genoese trading ship – but the major diseases that seafarers are exposed to now often have their onset many years after seafarers have left the sea. Engineers exposed to engine-room asbestos, and deck crew on oil product tankers exposed to benzene, will only develop life-threatening diseases many years after exposure. And seafarers' periodic medical examinations are, in any case, designed to screen out the unfit from the seafarer workforce. So the 59 seafarer shipboard deaths from disease tell us very little about occupational exposure to disease.

The four reported suicides

are probably an underestimate. The authorities are often reluctant to distress family and friends by attributing a death to suicide unless there is strong evidence, such as a suicide note. It is likely that some of nine who disappeared at sea, and eight who went missing but were subsequently found drowned, were also suicides.

In 1885 there was a report from a UK Royal Commission on loss of life at sea. It stated that every year one in 73 seafarers would die at sea. That terrible death toll is now enormously reduced: seafarers are no longer dying for a living. But, nevertheless, fatalities in the shipping industry remain far higher than in other industries, apart from the fishing industry. Given that ship disasters and dirty weather are responsible for very few of the total seafarer deaths, is it acceptable that fatal injuries in shipping are more than twice as high as those in the construction industry?