The modern day challenges to seafarers’ health

Seafarers’ way of life makes it difficult for them to access regular healthcare. Radical solutions are needed and looking to the past could help to awaken the industry, and consequently to us – seafarers and those concerned with seafarers – to the dangers of modern life. The outrage at the hijacking of the VLCC Sirius Star with her million dollar hazardous cargo gave the world a wake-up call with regard to the dangers of modern life and particularly seafarers’ health and safety, across the world.

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Globalisation does not just dilute response and concern when it comes to dramatic events and acts, however, it also impacts upon the more everyday lives and wellbeing of seafarers. Earlier this year, I received a telephone call from a medical practitioner in England who was worried about the wellbeing of crew members aboard relatively safe vessels calling at UK ports. The doctor was concerned that where medical investigations were required in non-emergency situations, it was very difficult for proper consultations to be arranged ashore at short notice and often out of hours. Furthermore, the doctor pointed out that before any results of tests could be acquired, the patient was likely to be half way across the sea and inaccessible to the consultant who had ordered the tests. On local hospital wards, the consultant who had ordered the tests was very difficult for proper consultations to be arranged ashore at short notice and often out of hours. Furthermore, the doctor pointed out that before any results of tests could be acquired, the patient was likely to be half way across the sea and inaccessible to the consultant who had ordered the tests. On local hospital wards, where medical investigations are commonly on a casual basis, all militate against the development of adequate care and a regularbasis by a company doctor. The doctor got to know the seafarers and their medical histories, and by this straightforward route – ship visiting and discussions with seafarers as they worked – was able to monitor their health. Now, he told me, nobody does this.

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