

THE SIRC COLUMN



The occupational stress suffered by seafarers is an issue that needs addressing by the shipping industry as

a whole, says Michelle Thomas of the Seafarers' International Research Centre

During the past five years I have been at the Seafarers' International Research Centre I have spoken to many seafarers of different nationalities and ranks and in a variety of sectors of the industry. In the course of these conversations I have become increasingly struck by how many seafarers routinely give accounts of experiences and events onboard ship that could only be described as traumatic. These events range from witnessing a violent or fatal injury, discovering the body of a colleague who has committed suicide, dealing with an attempted rape, to managing a potentially life threatening situation such as abandoning ship, an engine room fire or pirate attack. These incidents are frequently not "once-in-a career", isolated events. For example, one seafarer spoke of two suicides and

All in a day's work for seafarers?

two work-related deaths occurring on board his ship in one tour of duty alone.

For seafarers, the hazards and dangers of life at sea are an every day reality. This is something that is reflected in the routine, matter-of-fact manner that these stories are told. However, the fact that these events are often accepted as part of a seafaring career does not mean that they are not experienced as emotionally stressful. Indeed, I have spoken to a number of seafarers who were clearly quite affected by the events they experienced. For example, one seafarer talked about the nightmares and sleepless nights he suffered after leading a response to a potentially fatal fire in an engine room. He explained: "As mate, I was the person in charge of the fire-fighting. And you had to get people to go down to that engineroom. And I was the one who pushed them... I kept getting this feeling that I, . . . I might have killed someone."

In addition to experiencing traumatic events in the workplace, seafarers, like any other individuals,



may have to deal with stressful incidents that occur at home. However, such difficult life-events as divorce, or the death or sickness of a family member, can be particularly hard to cope with while at sea. One seafarer spoke to me of the tensions he experienced during the breakdown of his marriage. He said: "I was deepsea and I couldn't sleep. Sometimes it was terrible. I just

couldn't get it out of my mind, you know. I could not get home. I wanted just to get on a ship and just forget about home, but I couldn't – it was there." The problems of being physically removed from the situation and the support networks of family and friends can be compounded by the social isolation experienced on ships owing to decreased crew sizes and increases in

single-person tasking. In this context, it perhaps should not be surprising that suicide rates are high among seafarers compared with other occupational groups.

Stressful events in the form of illness, relationship-breakdown and bereavement are, unfortunately, a sad reality of life and, despite technological advances, seafaring continues to be a dangerous

STRESSFUL events are a sad reality of life for seafarers. This was certainly the case for the crew of the small bulk carrier Magi who kept their leaking ship afloat for four days until it finally broke its back and sank. They were rescued and landed in the UAE but, with no ship, and having been transferred to another vessel at sea, they had no right to stay. The owner paid for their repatriation, but refused to pay their wages, so they had to go home with only what The Mission to Seafarers' Dubai chaplain, Stephen Miller, was able to give them.

occupation, with the subsequent risk of injury, trauma and even death. Many seafarers cope very successfully after traumatic events and draw support from shipmates, or friends and family ashore. Additional support can be drawn from The Mission to Seafarers, Apostleship of the Sea and other seafarer welfare organisations, such as the free seafarers' helpline on 800 73232737. The significance of

traumatic events has been recognised by some companies which have taken steps to develop welfare support structures for their employees, including access to free and confidential counselling services. Company support can also be given by providing improved access to affordable ship-shore communication, which can go some way towards addressing the physical distance between seafarers and their families and friends ashore. Equally important is company support to allow the seafarer to disembark in the event of an emergency at home, or to provide opportunities to extend leave periods in order to deal with such events should they occur.

Occupational stress is widely recognised as a major health concern in many industries, and the living and working conditions of seafarers perhaps make stress particularly significant, as seafarers are separated from their homes and families and often exposed to traumatic workplace events. This is an issue which should be addressed by the industry as a whole and which would not only promote the health of individual seafarers but would also contribute to the retention of a committed and professional workforce.