

# Speaking up for better on-board welfare



Now is the time to put seafarers' living conditions on employers' agendas, says **Helen Sampson**, director of the Seafarers International Research Centre

LAST July, we had a symposium at the Seafarers International Research Centre at which we presented the findings from some of our research projects to an audience of policymakers, ship operators, regulators, trade union and maritime mission representatives, P&I club and classification society personnel, and academics. It's a pity more seafarers couldn't have been with us, but in presenting our research there was, nevertheless, an opportunity to voice some of the "collective" concerns they have reported to us. For example, one of our papers was about welfare facilities and we reported what seafarers felt they needed to access in port in these days of fast turn arounds and high security.

We also discussed the very poor level of welfare provision on board today's vessels. We highlighted the fact that many seafarers have to contribute to welfare funds on board in order to ensure that ships carry the most basic of entertainment facilities (e.g. DVDs). In fact, when the data we collected were analysed, we were surprised at how many seafarers in our survey reported that their on-board welfare supplies (limited as they were) had to be purchased from funds raised by "mandatory" levies (almost like taxes) on seafarers on board. We were less surprised to learn how few sports and recreational facilities are made available to seafarers on board and how limited access to email remains.

In an echo of comments made at other conferences, one member of the audience asked

what we thought seafarers would like on board to improve welfare. He suggested that other than email there was little appetite among seafarers for specific welfare provision. We know from our research that this is not the case. However, we do wonder if seafarers have become so used to being treated poorly that they fear raising suggestions for better welfare on board. They may indeed have lost their capacity to imagine what could be improved, having become so accustomed to employers telling them that everything is "too expensive", "too difficult", "too impractical".

One only has to take a look at a cruise ship to see that there is little which is impractical on board a modern vessel and, given recent trends in freight rates, we feel that most impartial observers would suggest that "too expensive" is no longer a valid excuse for the neglect of seafarers' welfare on board. This is a question of priorities, and for some companies the moment has come when seafarers are rising a little higher on their list of priorities as they are finding it more and more difficult to recruit and retain competent officers. This could be the moment for seafarers to make known to their employers the changes they would like to see in on-board welfare-related facilities. It's a moment when they might be heard when explaining what they need to make a life of isolation, boredom, and hard work, more tolerable.

On the right is one "vision" for better welfare provision aboard – mine, based upon my time as a researcher on board ship. I've named my mythical ship the *MV Inspiration* and I've chosen to imagine that she's a vessel where alcohol has been banned. (SIRC research suggests that the banning of alcohol can have a very detrimental impact upon seafarers social activities and welfare.)

## The MV Inspiration

"windows"; clean, well maintained and bright furnishings; and a couple of small coffee tables. In each room there is a refrigerator containing milk, water and soft drinks. A kettle and the makings of coffee and tea are available on a table in the corner where a bowl of fresh fruit and a packet of biscuits are also provided.

On a lower deck, there are two further recreation spaces. One is a dedicated gymnasium. This is a large space with reasonable headroom. It is well-ventilated. There is a VCR with the screen fixed to the wall and a treadmill, fixed cycle, and rowing machine all face this screen. Away from the fitness equipment with plenty of space surrounding it, there is a table tennis table. A darts board is placed at the end of the gym with clear access unimpeded by any other equipment. The other room is a music room. This contains some comfortable seating and a karaoke machine/VCR. At one end there is a selection of musical instruments

On the main deck there is a surprise: a café! It contains a juke box (no payment required) and a shiny metal machine that can produce lattes, cappuccinos, hot chocolate, and espressos. Every day, ship-baked cakes are made available alongside the drinks. Mineral water, juices, and soft drinks are also on the menu. The café is open every evening from 6-10pm. Along one side is a bench upon which screens and terminals give access to free and private email. There are two card tables covered in green felt. On one, there are several decks of cards in good condition, on the other there is a complete mah jong set. Other seating is "booth style" and there is a central circular table that can seat up to six people.

On the deck is a dedicated area where basketball can be played, and a swimming pool – which is kept clean and is filled whenever the weather is fine and warm. Cool boxes are available to seafarers to take soft drinks to the poolside and comfortable mats can also be carried out and placed on the small deck around the pool for sunbathing and lounging. Finally, the ship contains a quiet reading room where up-to-date magazines and newspapers, as well as a selection of books, can be found.

This ship, in addition to the usual officer and crew mess facilities, has two recreation rooms which are open to all crew members (officers and non-officers) but one is a smoking room and one is no-smoking. A VCR is provided in each with comfortable seating; large

No wonder the ship above is called *Inspiration*! I know that many of you, having read about what is on board, will be chuckling and saying "that'll be the day" and "get real". But many of these things are superficial and relatively cheap. Even the bigger ideas are not "off the wall". There are older vessels, and some modern ones owned by high class companies, that offer such facilities. On a dry ship there is no

reason why a café should not replace the ship's bar that used to be found on many ships.

Aboard an old Swedish vessel on which I undertook research eight years ago there was a cinema, sauna, gymnasium, table tennis room, swimming pool and library. These things are not impossible. They are simply not provided by operators with other priorities.

At this time and this moment, in a labour market

in which companies are finding it ever harder to recruit officers, there is an opportunity to put seafarers' living conditions back on employers' agendas. Some of our friends at the symposium wanted to know what seafarers want on board and that's something that seafarers, not those of us ashore should determine. So my request to seafarers is this: "Please speak up, and tell them: what's your inspiration?"