



Seafarers in Crisis

Largely unappreciated and undervalued, seafarers today are at last being recognized for the critical role they play in the global economy. Keeping them healthy is job one.

BY TONY MUNOZ

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Professional mariners have long been documented as exemplars of a life filled with stress, anxiety and loneliness. Spending months at sea, away from family, friends and familiar surroundings, can lead to all kinds of problems – mental and physical.

With the advent of COVID-19 and now the war in Ukraine, those problems have multiplied, and the wellbeing of mariners has never been more critical – not just for themselves but for the continued functioning of global supply chains.

When the cruise industry suspended operations in March 2020, mariners, staff and customers were stranded while ships lingered in ports or at sea waiting for authorities to find solutions to get them disembarked. But on commercial cargo ships, which were not the main focus at first, crews – and shipowners – struggled to get travel visas and find seafarers to relieve them and ports where

they could disembark, and many were trapped onboard for months to even a year beyond their contracts.

During normal international operations and with approximately two million seafarers worldwide, there are hundreds of crew changes each month involving thousands of mariners. Stranded ships meant additional stress and anxiety for seafarers anxious to reunite with their families. It also had enormous impact on global supply chains.

Crisis Management

“The pandemic created challenges for everyone including the maritime industry,” says Gur Prasad Kohli, Business Development Manager, Marine, for AP Companies Global Solutions, a leading international health care management and cost-containment company.

“We’ve all had to learn how to live with different rules, constantly changing restrictions and the lack of perspective to manage future operations,” he explains. “This led to greater trust and transparency in the use of telemedicine, and we became more proactive in providing remote access to qualified doctors and nurses to deal with

medical problems including COVID management and mental health on ships.”

The growing acceptance of telemedicine among shipowners and operators has been a big step forward.

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There have been numerous studies about the disadvantages of shipboard life under normal circumstances, but the impact of COVID and the long-term effects of being stranded, abandoned or confined by authorities have yet to be known. Yet positive reports about peer support during these unprecedented challenges are encouraging.

“Companies understand the value of maintaining healthy crews and how their wellbeing impacts revenues,” says Nedko Panayotov, Head of Strategic Partnerships for Tritan Software Corporation, a leading provider of health and safety software and services. “At the start of COVID, we developed procedures for mass vaccinations of crew and documented them in accordance with regulations, which included working collectively with the CDC and clients to ensure the required reporting and compliance were completed.”

Maintaining healthy crews became all the more important after the Russian invasion of Ukraine effectively reduced the available pool of deck officers and rated mariners by 15 percent. The displacement of Ukrainians and the inability of Russians to get travel visas immediately created a shortage of maritime workers. Even if you could find Ukrainian or Russian sailors, many ship operators didn’t want to mix them on the same ship.

Another important factor in maintaining seafarer health and providing access to health care are relationships with local government agencies and health care centers.

“Because Seattle was the epicenter of the outbreak in early 2020,” says Ann Jarris, MD & CEO of Discovery Health MD, a Seattle-based, physician-led company that focuses on providing health services for mariners and others, “our relationship with the University of Washington enabled us to access testing for seafarers very early. And our relationship with the Washington and Alaskan Departments of Health enabled us to prioritize vaccines, point-of-care testing and oral antivirals for the maritime industry.”

Black Sea Dilemma

The war in Ukraine has posed great danger for crews and ships in the Black Sea. At the start of the conflict, more than 2,000 seafarers were stranded on over 100 ships, and the IMO



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Today, there are more than 130 ships congested at the exit point of the Black Sea, south of Snake Island, trying to reach terminals in Romania. Many of the ports in southern Ukraine have been mined or blocked with sunken barges and cranes. Seven ships have been hit by missiles, and two merchant seafarers have died, with mariners leaving the region in droves if they can get relieved.

and international aid organizations created task forces to address issues about seamen being trapped on ships.

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Some ships have even gone into cold layup, which could take months get them operational again. Getting food and supplies to the ships has been extremely difficult, and insurance costs for ship transits in the Black Sea have skyrocketed.

Fortunately, conditions have improved of late, and at least four bulkers (as of this writing) carrying much-need-

ed Ukrainian grain and corn have sailed through a safe corridor established by an agreement among the U.N. and the governments of Turkey, Russia and Ukraine. Government officials are now calling for the agreement to be expanded to achieve their goal of restoring full operation at the Black Sea ports.

As conditions improve, health care companies have stepped up their efforts as well. “We now support telemedicine and medical care for some of the largest ship management companies in the world,” says Tritan’s Panayotov. “We’ve expanded our presence and opened an office in Cyprus and launched SeaSafe®, our new Safety Management software platform, which will modernize QHSE for the industry. We’ve also partnered with Allianz Care and its global network of providers.”

AP Companies has expanded its offerings as well. “While getting physical access to stranded mariners in an overburdened medical infrastructure is a challenge,” says Kohli. “We provide 24/7 telemedical care as a first re-

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sponder. We've also created several new products including an enhanced PEME (pre-eligibility medical expenses) across 25 countries where seafarers are sourced."

Caring for Seafarers

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As the industry adds more tonnage to the international fleet, the greatest challenge will be providing qualified professional mariners, and it's incumbent on operators to provide proper health and medical care for its seafarers.

"Onboard ships, officers are becoming more comfortable managing healthcare issues," says Discovery Health's Jarris. "We found that vessel owners, shipyards and remote plant operators value the proactive medical readiness of employee care including access to our telemedicine

and availability of doctors and nurses in port. The entire infrastructure of maritime workers has evolved, and we're supporting the industry on the front lines."

Crewing companies like Danica Crewing Services, featured on this edition's cover, are training officers to communicate and interact with crewmembers and deal with issues like health care early on – before they become problems. Leadership and the behavior of officers are critical to the *mental* health of seafarers as well. A culture of teamwork and camaraderie can go a long way toward improving seafarers' dispositions and energy levels onboard.

The experiences gained since the pandemic have accelerated new technologies and levels of care. A decade ago, ships didn't have the bandwidth or technology to support interactive medical care through telemedicine. Now they do.

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