

Wellness at Sea Conference, Friday 16 March 2018

Conference Resolution Paper

1. Context

Sailors' Society's second *Wellness at Sea* Conference was held on Friday 16 March at 99 City Road Conference Centre, and was supported by headline sponsor, Inmarsat and lead media partner, TradeWinds. Other sponsors were UK P&I Club, Brightwell Payments, Wescom Signal & Rescue UK Ltd and Future Care Inc.

Attended by over 120 delegates, the Conference sought to address the need for better on board wellness initiatives, whilst emphasising the significant benefits that this can bring to both seafarers and shipping companies alike. All were united in their agreement for the need for better systems to be in place in order to protect and advance seafarer wellness.

Delegates benefited from excellent presentations from academics and industry experts which offered insight into key aspects of crew well-being, including physical, emotional, intellectual and social wellness. Recent research was presented which shed light on topics that included crew morale and retention, ship safety and digital connectivity.

The purpose of this paper is to consolidate the wealth of information received at the Conference in order to draw together the overarching themes of the day.

2. Causes of Poor Seafarer Wellness

Neil Ellis, Research Associate of SIRC, Cardiff University, in his presentation of research, noted three major factors that cause poor mental health in seafarers. These are social isolation; lack of restoration, including long working hours, fatigue, lack of shore leave; and stress, including work pressure, bullying and fear of criminalisation. There are, of course, other factors leading to poor seafarer wellness, but these are three commonly cited key concerns that seafarers face, all of which can have particularly severe ramifications if neither recognised nor dealt with properly. Given the context of the extremely restrictive environment in which seafarers find themselves at sea, it is not hard to see how these factors can make life incredibly difficult for them.

It was helpful to delve deeper and consider the role of company culture on board a ship. Paddy Rodgers, CEO of Euronav, sought to emphasise just how important the image of seafaring really is. He mentioned that very often there is a perception of seafaring being a very risky and manly occupation, conveyed through the words, "wooden ships and iron men", which leads to the inevitable consequence of seafarers feeling the need to conform to this image. Paddy stressed that the problem with a fantasised perception such as this is that it masks reality – what is really going on beneath the surface – which prevents the right course of action being taken. Providing a first hand account of his experience of depression at sea, Dan Thompson, Master Mariner of the Port of London Authority, confirmed that this is indeed very often the case with seafarers failing to address mental health problems out of fear of appearing weak and falling short of the aspirational image of the archetypal macho seafarer. From his own experiences, Dan testified to the fact that depression

is still very much a taboo subject and that many are too scared to talk about it. Dan also cited bullying, often coming from the senior ranks, as being a key contributor leading to depression, which “chips away at your mental sanity” with formal complaints being disregarded. It is perhaps easy to see how a culture of bravado, where mental health is never spoken about and concerns are swept under the carpet, can serve to exacerbate, or significantly contribute to, the three causes of poor mental health that Neil identified.

3. The Cost of Not Looking after Seafarer Wellness

The economic cost of poor seafarer wellness was made explicit by Sophia Bullard, Crew Health Programme Director of UK P&I Club, in her case study of a 25 year old second officer who died one month into his contract in a suspected suicide, despite a clear PEME six months earlier. Sophia noted that following a police investigation, the deployment of correspondents and assistance from lawyers, the estimated cost to the company is likely to exceed USD 200,000. Christina DeSimone, CEO and Founder of Future Care Inc. also spoke of the huge financial cost of poor seafarer wellness by noting that ship deviation, following seafarer illness or an incident, causes severe commercial and financial hardship, likely to range from \$50,000 to \$250,000+. These eye watering figures, from both Sophia and Christina’s examples, are hugely significant as they serve to clearly illustrate the financial cost of poor seafarer wellness, which should surely act as an incentive for companies to implement better wellness procedures. However, it would be fair to say that, unfortunately, not every wellness case is preventable by the company.

Depression was mentioned several times throughout the day as being a key symptom of poor seafarer wellness and it is important to see just how widespread it is amongst seafarers with seafarer depression posing a huge threat to the shipping industry. Professor Rafael Lefkowitz of Yale University, whilst presenting his research, noted that if we consider two large vessels, there is a strong chance that at least one of the seafarers on board either of these ships is feeling depressed nearly every day. Rafael’s findings from the Seafarer Wellness Survey revealed that 12% of seafarers screened positive for depression with 1 in 50 seafarers feeling depressed everyday. These results are quite shocking and are especially significant when we consider the impact that depression can have on safety and work performance.

Drawing upon real life case studies, it would seem that there is a significant link between work pressure and depression and poor mental health. Dan Thompson, speaking of his own experience of depression whilst at sea, described how huge pressure imposed on him, together with his depression, led to his standards of work to drop. Dan even stated that his depression, which was exacerbated by work pressure and fatigue, had such a strong grip on him that it compromised the quality of his work and posed a significant risk to ship safety. Julian Bray, Editor in Chief of TradeWinds, also alluded to the link between work pressure and mental health by describing a case study of a young Filipino who was worried about the next nine months on board his ship, working seven days a week, 18 hours a day, with six or seven hours’ sleep at most. This is an important point that highlights the extremely arduous nature of seafaring and hints at the fact that, although mental health risks are often hidden, they can lead to significant problems which brew beneath the surface. Dan warned that the risk of mental health to safety is not to be underestimated; there needs to be more education about depression and mental illness as seafarers are very often too scared to talk about it.

Neil Ellis noted that depression is not a new phenomenon and cited Iversen's large scale review of literature between 1960-2009, which revealed a trend in poor seafarer mental health. However, he also commented that the trend seems to be worsening. Drawing upon SIRC evidence taken between 2011 and 2016, he concluded that there has been a significant increase in seafarer depression. This is important to note as it suggests that the cost of poor seafarer wellness to the industry – mainly through financial loss and ship safety – will likely continue to rise unless it is properly tackled.

4. Benefits of better seafarer wellness

Improved safety and financial savings are two major benefits of improved seafarer wellness, both of which were mentioned several times throughout the day. Paddy Rodgers demonstrated this by appealing to experience within Euronav where, following some accidents and near misses in 2013, it was decided that regular visits should be made to the crew in order to support them by showing genuine care and appreciation. This led to valuable changes being made and the results were outstanding, resulting not only in better safety and efficiency, but improved business as share prices started to go up. Paddy maintains that *Wellness at Sea* (and any similar schemes) cannot be a bolt on; rather it's central to running a good business.

Captain Michalis Malliaros, Fleet Manager of Euronav, drew upon the link between organisational productivity and financial gain by citing the following benefits: increased retention rates; minimised health derived costs (extra calls, repatriations, failures to join, etc.); better social cohesion amongst crew with avoidance of conflict; increased motivation and productivity; and happy crew acting as ambassador for the company, which increases attractiveness. These are significant benefits that highlight just how important it is for seafarers to feel valued and cared for in such a way that empowers them to work well and remain loyal to their company.

Whilst also mentioning better work performance, increased safety and improved crew retention as key benefits, Neil Ellis additionally highlighted fewer repatriations, less unhealthy seafarer behaviour (such as drug and alcohol misuse) and corporate responsibility as being other key considerations and benefits of paying closer attention to seafarer wellness. Neil hinted at the fact that corporate Social Responsibility should be a key concern of companies as it can play a crucial role in the image that companies portray to their customers.

Looking at connectivity as a key requirement of social wellness, there is much evidence to suggest the benefits of good, reliable internet provision aboard vessels, which is now considered a top priority for seafarers. Dr Rikke Jensen of Royal Holloway, University of London, using evidence gleaned from her fieldwork, quoted a seafarer who maintained that "on a scale from 1 to 10, I would say that internet connectivity is an 8...food is the only thing that is more important." Leading on from this, Dr Jensen claims that connectivity is important because it empowers, engages and enables seafarers. This boosts morale, which, in turn, helps them to perform better in their roles. Drew Brandy, SVP Market Strategy of Inmarsat, supported this view by stating that, if companies want to keep their crew, they must provide connectivity. Providing connectivity provides less than 1% of the total operating costs, which suggests that the benefits of providing of good internet on board far outweigh the initial costs of implementation.

5. Industry Reaction to Wellness Initiatives

Whilst the general consensus seemed to be that the industry as a whole could do much better in championing better seafarer wellness, it was heartening to hear of companies that have sought to improve standards of crew wellness and, in doing so, show genuine care for their crew. Paddy Rodger's example of Euronav implementing crew visits and taking time to make changes on board is a good example of this.

It was also encouraging to see in Sophia Bullard's case study how the company that dealt with the suspected suicide of the 25 year old seafarer. The company made great efforts to respond really well by following lots of steps to protect the well-being of the crew, all of which were extremely costly to the ship owner. Sophia commented that owners are well aware of that suicide one crew members poses a significant risk to the rest of the crew. Ella Hagell, Divisional Director of Tindall Riley, supported this by stating that P&I clubs often ask what they can do in order to avoid situations such as this. This suggests that companies are not blind to crew wellness and that there is some recognition of the fact that it is a serious concern.

Drew Brandy mentioned that many more operators are embracing technology in order to allow seafarers more social time, which helps to enhance their social wellness. Drew also noted that there have been numerous studies undertaken by research agencies to look at crew behaviours and levels of connectivity, which is in itself extremely positive. Drew explained how in the past few years there has been a significant change in the attitudes of ship owners and managers, which has seen a move from no internet connectivity to much more widespread access. However, Drew commented that there is still work to be done as, when internet is provided, crew are often charged and the level of functionality remains limited. It was helpful, though, to hear of a different perspective from Mark Robertshaw, SVP Sales and Commercial of Brightwell Payments, who mentioned that social media can lead to sleep deprivation following seafarers contacting family in huge time differences, and that this is the reason that some companies limit internet access. This hints at the fact that, whilst financial cost might be the reason for some companies to limit internet access for its seafarers, other companies might have additional reasons for doing so, some of which might actually be with the consideration of the seafarer in mind. What remains clear is the universal demand amongst seafarers for better connectivity.

Whilst, generally, there is still a way to go when we consider the collective shipping industry's approach to wellness, it is important to appreciate the excellent work that is being done by some companies, which has great potential to inspire a culture change within the industry.

6. A way Forward – Steps to Take

In no particular order, the following is a list of key recommendations that were raised during the Conference, all of which seek to improve seafarer wellness.

i. Improve Connectivity

Better connectivity, specifically in the form of improved internet provision, was mentioned several times as an essential need for seafarers. This is becoming increasingly more urgent as seafarers begin to choose contracts based on the strength of the internet aboard a vessel, which suggests that if companies want to attract and retain the best seafarers, they need to invest more in internet provision. It was interesting to see that this is the same in the aviation industry and David Coiley, SVP Channel & Partner Relations of Inmarsat, confirmed this in his presentation, showing how aviation staff are now expecting internet connectivity and in the last eighteen months, in particular, passengers are increasingly beginning to see connectivity as a basic right. As a result, Inmarsat is working with the London School of Economics to quantify the financial opportunities of better connectivity for the airline industry for first time. The fact that this has provided something of a “revolution” within the aviation industry adds credence to the argument that better connectivity would bring significant benefits to the maritime industry, too.

Drew Brandy mentioned that the cost of providing connectivity is not actually that large and that, consequently, it should not be seen as a luxury. Rather, internet provision should be considered as essential equipment for vessels, as well as a vital human need. Drew also noted that within the maritime industry, there is a sense of fear that connectivity will be abused, which is perhaps indicative of why some companies are reluctant to make efforts to improve internet provision.

Based on her fieldwork, Dr Jensen also gave some early recommendations for steps that companies can take in order to improve the problem of poor connectivity. These were to even out the unevenness of connectivity across ships and companies; provide regulatory framework for internet access standards and requirements; gain a better understanding of the everyday rhythms and routines of connectivity; recognise internet connectivity as an integral part of a everyday modern seafaring; recognise internet connectivity as an integral part of care and welfare at sea; and to appreciate that connectivity should not be understood in isolation or as separate from social wellness. All of these elements point towards the key findings of Dr Jensen’s research, which confirm that internet provision is now considered a basic human need and a key aspect of seafarer wellness.

ii. Full Ratification of the MLC

Natalie Shaw emphasised the importance of all countries ratifying the MLC, calling to mind the fact that its full benefits are severely limited if not subscribed to by all. Natalie also mentioned that, in practice, it is actually the flagstate’s interpretation of the MLC which really counts and, as a result, seafarers’ welfare is being compromised when certain parts of the MLC are misunderstood and not properly put into effect. Perhaps if there was universal ratification of the MLC, there would be greater clarity on what exactly the MLC demands and how it should be applied?

Natalie highlighted that 86 countries have now ratified the MLC, but there still remains 101 ILO member states yet to sign up. Natalie mentioned that there are ten countries, in particular, which would make a real difference if they were to ratify the MLC. These are: Brazil; Macedonia; Mexico; Cuba; Turkey; Egypt; Djibouti; Peru; Uruguay and Guinea.

iii. Implement a Solid Crew Welfare Package and Policy

Captain Malliaros, in his presentation, proposed that prudent operators should develop a solid crew welfare package that covers all aspects of crew wellness (including physical, emotional, social,

intellectual and spiritual components). The operator should provide resources, whilst also supporting the proper implementation of the company's welfare policy and should allow time to evaluate the effectiveness of the programme. It should include dietary menus, making the most of rest hours, gym equipment and training for all, good communication, entertainment equipment, book libraries and training material. The company's role should be to put everything in place before implementing it. Crew should be invited and encouraged to take part. A programme, such as Wellness at Sea, would be effective here in demonstrating the company's to crew wellness.

Mentoring was suggested as being effective and would fit well within a wellness package. This is something that the Wellness at Sea programme could look at potentially including in the course content. Bridget Hogan, Director of Publishing and Membership of the Nautical Institute, mentioned the importance of soft skills for seafarers and, in particular, reverse mentoring. Ella Hagell also called to mind the model of academic parents and siblings as used by several universities in the UK and suggested a similar model could be used on board merchant vessels. Ella mentioned that a key concern is that many seafarers often retire to their cabins during their free time and mentoring could help here. Mentoring could be beneficial here as it would encourage seafarers to draw upon their peers who are physically present – their natural support network – rather than confiding in social media, or not sharing their concerns at all.

v. Focus on Prevention

Sophia Bullard mentioned that a good method of prevention is to look at high profile insurance cases to see how any other similar future scenarios could be avoided. Sophia also suggested the following practical steps: support though implementing company mental health policy; awareness – being aware of triggers and notice symptoms; value – value the continued contribution of your crew; and education through initiatives such as Wellness at Sea. Prevention rather than cure is the philosophy of Wellness at Sea and any approach that seeks to do this will always have more chance at addressing issues before they develop into bigger problems. It also makes good financial sense to take steps to work towards reducing potential issues, rather than waiting until they develop into significant problems, which will most likely be harder to resolve.

Christina DeSimone's presentation of the effectiveness of telemedicine also focused on prevention and the proven benefits to ship efficiency. Future Care seeks to tackle health problems early on, using telemedicine on board the ship, before they have the chance to develop into more significant illnesses. Additionally, since shoreside treatment is so expensive, often ranging between \$2,000 and \$5,000, Future Care offers a more convenient and affordable option and services include wellness counselling lasting 15-20 minutes in order to catch and treat the beginnings of mental illness. The use of telemedicine on board a vessel is a good investment in seafarer wellness and can be used to identify and tackle any issues before they have the chance to develop.

vi. Improve Communication

In his presentation, Paddy Rodgers mentioned Euronav's 2005 merger and how company communication improved vastly in the time that followed due to good branding, a common business ethic, clarity of roles, open communication, a just culture and emphasis on quality and professionalism. The change here was obvious and visible to all with staff commenting on benefits, such as shared know how and expertise, admitting mistakes and asking for help.

Good communication is vital for the successful running of the ship and is an area that Wellness at Sea pays particular attention to. Johan Smith, Sailors' Society's Project Manager for Wellness at Sea, mentioned, interestingly, that although on board communication is governed by conventions such as the STCW, the MLC and ISM code, if you look at incident reports, it is evident that it is the interpersonal skills and interpersonal communication that fail seafarers. Inadequate communication is listed as one of the three main factors in shipping accidents (Rothblum, 2000:8) The solution is therefore a stronger focus on relational skills. A renewed effort to learn to communicate through connecting with fellow crewmembers, and having a greater understanding of one another, would significantly improve life on board. Kuba Szymanski, Director General of Intermanager, highlighted the importance of this by calling to mind "the Generation Gap" and the importance of overcoming it, particularly with communication in mind. He offered some questions to ponder:

1. Who should manage that gap?
2. Have we realised that there is an issue?
3. Are we trying to be inclusive?

vii. Take Seriously Findings from Recent Research

Professor Lefkowitz, Neil Ellis and Dr Jensen presented key research findings from their individual studies which clearly point to key wellness concerns that need addressing. For example, Professor Lefkowitz's data from the Seafarer Wellness Survey clearly indicated that depression is paramount and that the top four contributors are food quality, isolation from family, contract length and amount of food. This evidence alone provides companies with vital information about seafarers which adds credence to the need for a wellness initiative, such as Wellness at Sea, to be put in place. There is much that companies could learn from by examining the data gathered in surveys such those as those devised by Professor Lefkowitz and Neil Ellis.

7. Concluding Remarks

The Conference provided an extremely interesting and stimulating forum for discussion with regard to seafarer wellness, which helped to confirm existing standpoints, whilst also offering fresh ideas that were perhaps new to some. Discussion is, of course, ongoing as collaborate efforts are made by individuals and organisations to change the culture within the shipping industry and bring about effective and lasting change for seafarers. It was excellent to hear from so many who shared a passion for seafarer wellness and it was encouraging to see evidence of change within the industry. There is much to do, but we are surely on the right track. Sailors' Society would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your support of Wellness at Sea and looks forward to further partnership in the future.