

Dealing with mental illness

The recognition and understanding of psychological disorders has progressed over many years, and yet it remains the case that, too often, such problems are not identified, or dealt with, as quickly, as knowledgably or as sympathetically as is the case with physical illness and injury.

This seems to be particularly the case in the context of the robust working environment typically encountered at sea. The Club views with concern the large numbers of seafarers now being repatriated early suffering from a range of psychological difficulties.

One report suggests that as many as one in three repatriations which require a medical escort are related to such ailments.

Great care must be taken to protect the interests of all seafarers when dealing with such issues. In extreme cases, the afflicted crew member can be a danger to others on board, or may constitute a suicide risk.

Help and advice is available to masters and crew in recognising - and dealing with those suffering from - mental illness. The World Health Organisation's 'International Medical Guide for Ships' divides the problem into three broad categories - anxiety, depression and psychotic disorders. It provides brief details of symptoms to assist early recognition, as well as limited advice on treatment.

However, the guide emphasises the need for more detailed, immediate assistance of the type that can be obtained through Radio Medical Advice from organisations such as Italy's Centro Internazionale Radio Medico (CIRM). This is a long-established provider of radio-medical assistance on an international basis. It has wide experience of providing medical assistance to people of all nationalities, all over the world. And it is fully aware of problems which may arise from the lack of an adequate onboard health culture.

The medical locker on board, for example, will almost certainly contain drugs which may constitute appropriate medication, but CIRM urges ships' staff to seek tele-medical advice, whenever possible, prior to administering any medicines. CIRM also reports that some problems are exacerbated because some ships' medical lockers are not

stocked in accordance with flag state requirements.

Prof Francesco Amenta, CIRM Scientific Director, says, "When dealing with psychological problems, including stress, anxiety and depression, requests for medical advice should always be sought at the earliest opportunity.

"What may be lacking in the maritime culture is sufficient sensitivity to health problems. For example, shipping is much more sensitive to technology and safety issues than it is to health problems, so it is perhaps not surprising to hear about the difficulties being encountered in dealing with mental health issues at sea."

Members are encouraged, where appropriate, to seek the advice of professional organisations such as CIRM, more details of which can be found at: www.cirm.it



Pictured above (left to right) are Ian Gooch, Ioana Gonciari, Ian Barr and Mike Berry, who form the StopLoss team at Billbrough. The team also produces reports which are published in the News section on the Club website (www.lso.com). Readers can now sign up via the website for email alerts on postings in the News section. And all editions of StopLoss are also available for download from the website.

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Check before fixing

It is sometimes the unfortunate case that, soon after issuing bills of lading for a long voyage, owners will realise that their time-charterers cannot or will not meet their obligations to pay hire. In many cases where bills have been issued, the ship will be under an obligation to the receivers to complete the voyage even if the owners have little or no prospect of receiving payment from charterers.

There are examples of sizeable, respectable chartering companies which have become insolvent, but the Club is also aware of several cases where a chartering company appears to have been set up with the intention of deliberately defrauding owners.

A common scam is for the fraudster to make the first hire payment to reassure the owner, while having entered into a sub-charter under which it will collect, say, 95 per cent of freight on completion of loading. As soon as the bills are issued, the fraudster 'disappears', having collected significantly more in freight than has been paid in hire.

Given the serious consequences of defaults and misconduct of this nature, the importance of thorough pre-fixture inquiries into the reliability and financial standing of potential charterers cannot be underestimated.

There are a number of companies that may be able to assist as part of the "due diligence" that owners are encouraged to undertake. Information

on some of the alternatives open to owners is available on the Links section of www.ISSO.com

Also, members can obtain more detailed advice via stoploss@a-billbrough.com

Mark 1 Eyeball rules

The latest UK Marine Accident Investigation Branch Safety Digest reports that, in a collision in dense fog, the master of a cargo ship had been unable to detect by radar the presence of a fishing vessel because "unknown to the master, the starboard radar was not tuned correctly".

The 'clutter' and 'gain' controls on the cargo ship's radar had apparently been adjusted earlier to reduce echoes from rain and waves, and had not been retuned when the conditions changed. As a result, the weak echo of the small fishing vessel was not detected by the master.

Meanwhile, the importance of radar tuning is highlighted even more starkly in a recent report from the Australian Transport Safety Bureau (ATSB) on the grounding of a ship on Rosemary Island, off the port of Dampier. It appears that other factors were involved in the casualty, but the ATSB findings include the observation that, "During the

voyage, the second mate had found the echoes of some targets hard to read, so he increased the radar's clutter and gain controls. There was some 'clutter' showing on the screen but, as he was not using the radar for navigation, it did not seem important to him. When the master

arrived on the bridge after the grounding, he reduced the radar range scale and adjusted the clutter and gain controls. What appeared to the second mate to be 'clutter' was, in

fact, Rosemary Island."

The grounding occurred at night, but in clear visibility. It is all the more remarkable in that neither the Officer of the Watch nor his look-out paid any attention to the Rosemary Island Light (range, ten nautical miles), which the master described as being "fine on the port bow" when he entered the wheelhouse. As the MAIB report says, "The Mark 1 eyeball" can be an under-used resource.

The MAIB safety digest can be downloaded from: www.maib.gov.uk





Premature opening of twistlocks



While the pressure on operators in the container trades to achieve quick turnaround times is well-known, these cases underline the need for vigilant checking of container securing arrangements prior to departure, and emphasise the importance of ensuring that the containers remain lashed until the ship is safely alongside at the next port.

Beware ORB failings

Port state control inspectors routinely scrutinise Oil Record Books, and any discrepancies discovered in entries can have very serious consequences, including imprisonment or fines for the individuals responsible on board, and substantial penalties on owners and operators. Indeed, the need for extreme care in the completion of these documents has been highlighted again in two recent cases reported to the Club. These involved efforts by port state inspectors to have penalties imposed in circumstances where the alleged wrongdoings involved entries made in illegible handwriting and corrections deemed inappropriate because the original entry was no longer legible.

Great care and attention should be paid to all ORB entries. The Intertanko publication, 'A Guide for Correct Entries in the Oil Record Book' contains practical tips such as writing in block capitals and striking through mistakes rather than attempting to score them out. There are reports that a further edition of the publication will be released later this year. Details at: www.intertanko.com

StopLoss 44 featured a report on industry concerns about losses of containers from large containerships and, especially, the possible role played in such cases by the failures associated with fully automatic twistlocks in heavy weather conditions. But the Club has also received reports on cases of collapsed container stacks which appear to have involved failures in the lashing of the cargo and a likelihood that the manual twistlocks were open at the time of the accident.

In one instance, the ship was within an hour of the end of a short sea passage. Bad weather had been experienced for much of the voyage, but a deck log book entry just prior to the incident recorded "pitching easily to moderate sea and swell on starboard bow. Spray forward." But the ship began to roll as soon as it turned for the pilot station and, very shortly thereafter, an outboard stack of containers toppled, with the majority of the boxes being lost overboard. It was common ground that none of the containers appeared to have collapsed under an excessive stack weight, and that the boxes did not appear to have been locked together as they went over the side.

The receivers initially alleged that the loss resulted from the crew removing the lashing bars and opening the manual twistlocks, before being caught out by the unexpected change in the ship's motion. But, on being reminded that the lost stack had been from the foremost bay on the outboard starboard side, the receivers did accept that, if the crew had decided to begin unlashings, they were very unlikely to have started on the weather side. The owners were still faced with a sizeable exposure to the claims as the most plausible explanation was that the stack had not been lashed properly by the stevedores at the load port, and that the ship's staff had failed to check the lashings at the time or on passage.

In a second case, a collapse of stow inboard during heavy weather experienced on the approach to a discharge port caused damage to 22 containers, most of which contained high-value goods such as televisions. A subsequent survey of the containers established that the twistlocks were open, which may have been the result of the crew having prematurely opened the securing devices.



Beware over-reliance on AIS

The fitment of Automatic Identification Systems (AIS) on board all vessels of 300 grt or more is now mandatory. With a range comparable to that of a VHF radio, AIS is intended to enhance ship-to-ship and ship-to-shore communication. But, as recent incidents reported to the Club show, great care needs to be taken over the extent to which AIS data can be relied upon.

A ship's AIS transmits and receives data to and from other vessels and Vessel Traffic Service (VTS) stations. Three different types of data are broadcast by AIS: (1) 'static' data, such as call sign and name, which are input when the equipment is installed; (2) 'dynamic' data, such as position, course and speed (which are input automatically) and navigational status, requiring the Officer of the Watch (OOW) to enter manually whether the ship is, for example, under way, at anchor, or moored; and (3) 'voyage-related' information, including the ship's destination and ETA, which are again input manually. In a recent incident, the master of a large containership was calling the pilot boat as he approached a European port at night. As he looked out of the bridge window, the master spotted the steaming lights of a smaller ship that was apparently inward-bound for the

same pilot station. The master quickly established that his OOW was not aware of the presence of the other vessel.

The OOW explained that he had looked briefly at the AIS data of the other ship on his AIS-enhanced radar and noted that the vessel was declared to be at anchor and in a position which the OOW knew to be within the designated anchorage for the port. He had not then checked whether the ship was showing anchor lights or acquired the target so that the Closest Point of Approach and Time to Closest Point of Approach could be calculated. It became clear that the other vessel had just picked up its anchor and was on its way out of the anchorage towards the fairway buoy, but had forgotten to change the dynamic data on the AIS.

Rule 7 of the Colregs makes it clear that, when assessing risk of collision, "assumptions shall not be made on the basis of scanty information, especially scanty radar information". And the very good sense of also applying that cautious approach to AIS information was demonstrated when the containership was later passed by an outward-bound ship which was travelling at 14 knots, but which, on AIS, was declared to be 'moored'.

Falling down

THE Club recently handled a medical repatriation involving a seaman who had suffered head injuries falling from a portable ladder. The ship's staff had conducted a risk assessment prior to commencement of work and determined that, as he would be working at a height of more than two metres, the crew member should wear a safety harness connected to a lifeline. The lifeline was tended carefully throughout the time the seaman was on the ladder working. But he was allowed to disconnect the line prior to his descent and, as he descended, the ladder - which was not adequately secured - slipped, and he fell, striking his head on the tank top.

Fortunately, the ship was within a day's steaming of port and, after undergoing surgery, the injured crew member was able to leave hospital, after more than a week, and be repatriated for further treatment. It was almost three months before he was fit for work.

The accident investigation emphasised, among other things, that the risk assessment should have identified that the job should not have been undertaken while the ship was rolling and pitching in poor weather at sea.

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