Mental health issues are commented on frequently in the press and the UK Office of National Statistics records that suicide is the leading cause of death in England in adults below the age of 50. Conditions such as anxiety, depression, eating disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder and alcohol and drug abuse can affect anyone, and can impact on work performance.

Seafarers can be particularly susceptible to mental health issues. They are often far from home, with little contact with family and friends. There may be cultural differences between the seafarer and their co-workers which make it more difficult for them to build relationships, therefore making the seafarer feel isolated.

From time to time the Club receives alarm notifications of psychotic episodes, attempted suicides and, tragically, suicides of crew members. In many of these situations it is apparent that at no time prior to the specific event did the seafarer report, or receive counselling or treatment for, any mental health concerns. There are many causes of these events, including family issues and bullying by other seafarers. Whilst we are all encouraged to talk about mental health, it seems that it is still a taboo subject amongst seafarers and as a result they are missing out on vital support and treatment at the early stages of their illness.

So what should shipowners be doing?

Pre-medical Employment Examination (PEME)

The first step is to ensure you have a good quality PEME in place and to ensure the doctor is looking out for signs of mental illness. Please see the Clubs circular on Pre-Employment Medical Examination (PEME) Scheme and our Wellness at Sea document.

Preventing bullying

Seafarers who are bullied are likely to suffer stress. The Chamber of Shipping and the International Transport Workers’ Federation produced guidelines in 2016 for shipping companies, seafarers and seafarers’ organisations on how to eliminate bullying. They encourage shipping companies to develop policies to eliminate harassment and bullying and ensure they actively encourage seafarers to report bullying.

Shipping companies should have a company discipline code to deal with bullying and actively promote that bullying will not be tolerated.

To do so there needs to be awareness, and shipping companies are encouraged to display posters and notices, and provide guides and awareness programmes showing the effects of bullying. Seafarers themselves should also be encouraged to recognise bullying and to support seafarers who are being bullied, and to report bullying.

Mental health awareness

The National Maritime Occupational Health and Safety Committee has provided guidelines to shipping companies on mental health awareness. The guidelines recommend that shipping companies should adopt a policy or review their policies against the guidelines. The guidelines provide for promotion and support of mental health awareness and recommend free access to external sources of support for seafarers. They encourage awareness among all staff of the potential signs of mental health issues and identify factors which might indicate mental health issues such as changes in mood or their work, changes in eating habits or signs of excessive alcohol or drug use. It is recommended that training should be given at management level for signs of mental health issues.

The guidelines recommend that shipping companies should undertake regular consultations, with surveys for the seafarer to complete, relating to working conditions, communications and work life balance. Shipping companies should provide social and team building events for the seafarers to participate in. Where a seafarer is identified as having mental health issues, he or she should be given support and encouraged to make an appointment with a doctor when possible.

Whilst the guidelines to prevent bullying and mental health awareness go some way to highlighting mental illness issues on board, to have any real impact they need to be implemented. Only then might the taboo surrounding mental illness be removed and seafarers in need can receive the correct support, and hopefully tragic outcomes can be prevented.

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