

Medical examinations and emergencies on board ships

Introduction:

In addition to performing their normal duties on board ships, every seafarer must also be able to deal with emergency situations (e.g. fighting fires, lowering lifeboats, assisting passengers). Studies have shown that the physical capability of seafarers is often unsatisfactory, and obesity and ageing impair it even further.

A seafarer in weak physical condition cannot carry out physically demanding duties such as firefighting, cargo handling or rescue operations. This impaired capability is not only a risk for the safety of the vessel and other crew but it also puts the seafarer's own life in danger in emergency situations. Very obese people may not fit into a free-falling rescue boat or into an immersion suit. They may not be able to move through emergency escapes, or be carried to safety from a confined space in case of injury or illness.

Both weak physical condition and obesity impair the work ability of seafarers and are also risk factors for other diseases (e.g. diabetes, hypertension, ischemic vascular diseases, metabolic syndrome and obstructive sleep apnoea). How can we evaluate the overall risk when multiple conditions can act together, impairing a person's physical capability?

The ILO Guidelines for Conducting Medical Examinations for Seafarers provides a list of diseases which may affect a person's fitness for work at sea. The recommendations of STWC2010 also sets minimum standards for the physical fitness of seafarers. However, neither of these guidelines give any objective method or test for how fitness examinations should be carried out and decisions made. It is impossible for a medical examiner to go to the vessel to observe seafarers' abilities to carry out their emergency duties.

Conclusions:

Doctors need more training regarding the physical fitness and capability needed to perform emergency duties at sea. There is a need for objective and valid test tracks and guidelines to help medical examiners evaluate the physical capability of seafarers. The International Maritime Health Association is actively working for guidelines for medical examinations of seafarers, in co-operation with the International Maritime Organization and the ILO. The drawing up of the new International Working Ability Assessment Guidelines for healthy seafarers could be the next step in improving the health and well-being of seafarers and safety at sea.

TOPIC: 5 Standards of medical examinations and harmonization of national and international legislative acts

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