Humans first, workers second

by Dr Olivia Swift, *Senior Programme Manager, Lloyd's Register Foundation*

As the coronavirus pandemic took hold in early 2020, many seafarers found themselves stranded aboard their vessels as a significant crew change crisis unfolded globally. Border closures, strict quarantine requirements, and a slow vaccination rollout all had an impact on seafarers' mental health. We have known for some time now that seafarers' mental health is crucial to their wellbeing and safety. But as the pandemic unfolded and with 400,000 seafarers stranded at sea at one point, stakeholders within the maritime industry, including companies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), had to respond quickly by providing mental health and psychosocial interventions.

To understand more about how seafarers' mental health had been affected during the pandemic and what more can be done to support them, Lloyd's Register Foundation funded research involving an international team led by the University of the Philippines Visayas. The *Mental health interventions for international seafarers during the COVID-19 Pandemic* study focussed on what interventions were available to, and used by, seafarers during the pandemic and which they believed were most valuable in helping to manage mental health and wellbeing.

How do our seafarers view mental health interventions?

The pilot comprised in-depth interviews with 26 seafarers and survey responses from 1,412 seafarers. Filipinos made up 67% of the sample, with 8% Chinese, although the pilot study also included seafarers from several other countries such as Brazil, India, Jamaica, Japan, and the UK. The average age of respondents was 30 years old, and almost all of them were male (96%). More than half of the respondents (67%) had non-permanent contracts.

The research team, which included the World Maritime University and the University of Plymouth, identified 22 interventions as part of the pilot study, with 11 provided by company employers and 11 by other industry stakeholders such as seafarers, charities, and governments.

Almost 80% of seafarers said the most common intervention provided by employers during the pandemic were regular updates on crew changes and COVID-19, followed by timely crew changes (57%) and provisions of sufficient and high-quality personal protective equipment (PPE; 53%). Facilitating timely crew changes were listed by 79% of seafarers as the most helpful action an employer could facilitate. At the same time, 68% said that the provision of immediate family support would have been the second most useful – something that only 21.9% of companies provided.

The most common interventions by industry stakeholders experienced by seafarers were a positive atmosphere onboard (77%), physical exercise (70%), and casual counselling among crew members (70%). However, those interventions listed by seafarers as being most useful were communicating with family (87%) and being prioritised for vaccination (77.6%). That said, less than a third (30%) of the respondents were vaccinated against COVID-19 at the survey time.

The results revealed a real gap between what was provided to seafarers during the pandemic and what they viewed as most valuable in terms of mental health support. This may have been for one of two reasons – the support offered wasn't valued or seen as accessible by seafarers, or the interventions available were not communicated well enough, which meant that seafarers were not even aware of the support they could access.

Take positive steps

It is clear from the research findings that companies and other stakeholders overall



Photo: Lloyd's Register Foundation

need to improve their efforts to support seafarers' mental health and wellbeing, especially during crises. This should include timely crew changes, immediate access to family support, and the availability of adequate, high-quality PPE. All of this while promoting a safe working and living environment, such as reducing overtime hours and increasing Internet data allowance.

Likewise, governments need to take action to make sure that seafarers can be vaccinated against COVID-19, prioritising them as essential or frontline workers. NGOs and other industry stakeholders can also play their part in supporting companies to make, implement, and strengthen policies to encourage the creation of a positive atmosphere offshore. Plus, they can make a difference by developing creative and robust strategies to improve the awareness of, access to, and use of mobile mental health apps and virtual platforms. This will help give seafarers more access to spiritual, pastoral, and guidance counselling services and support.

The Neptune Declaration on Seafarer Wellbeing and Crew Change has seen more than 850 organisations across the maritime industry pledge to drive good practice and resolve the crew change crisis. This initiative is helping drive an industry-wide effort to improve seafarers' mental health, focusing on the themes identified by this research, including recognising seafarers as critical workers, giving them priority access to COVID-19 vaccines, and establishing and implementing gold-standard health protocols.

This is a positive step forward in tackling the bigger issues affecting seafarers' mental health and wellbeing, and I would encourage organisations to get behind the Neptune Declaration. However, the research also shows that the needs of seafarers vary. Fortunately, there are some simple steps that companies can take now.

Listen to your seafarers

By reviewing the mental health services you are providing directly to your team, you can better understand what more can be done. For example, have you made services such as mental health helplines, access to port chaplains, and the provision of immediate family support readily available? Do your seafarers know how to access these services?

Simply finding out what works for your crew by encouraging open and honest conversations and communication will help you understand what mental health support they would like to see. By gathering insight directly from seafarers about the issues affecting them, you can put the interventions in place that work best.

While the pandemic has highlighted the need for effective mental health interventions, seafarers will continue to need support when COVID-19 is less of a risk. As we all know, seafarers across the maritime industry carry 90% of trade worldwide, playing a vital role in the global supply chain. To fulfil their responsibilities at sea, they spend months away from home; they work long hours without sufficient rest, leading to stress and fatigue. Many experience short ship turnaround times, risk of criminalisation, harassment and bullying, and dangers from piracy.

That is why it is essential that the maritime industry learns from this study and recognises that seafarers are humans first, workers second, and takes steps to ensure that creating a safer and happier work environment is a long-term priority. ■

Lloyd's Register Foundation is an independent global charity that helps protect life and property at sea, on land and in the air. The University of the Philippines Visayas study will contribute to Lloyd's Register Foundation plans to build capacity in **What Works for Wellbeing in Maritime** and complements a **Lloyd's Register's COVID 2020 survey**, which looked at significant crew safety and wellbeing lessons learned from the pandemic. Lloyd's Register Foundation has also funded **The SafetyTech Accelerator** to engage stakeholders with tech solutions for objective and ethical, real-time assessments of seafarers' wellbeing, enabling more timely and effective interventions in support of both seafarers and safety. Head to **www.lrfoundation.org.uk/en** to discover more.