

➔ The Hong Kong Nautical Institute's Safe Manning seminar was a fascinating event, with the speakers casting light on a whole range of issues. The whole question of what we mean by safe manning might seem to be simple and obvious, but is complicated by all manner of different factors. The speakers gave some very vivid examples of how very important safe manning is for the operation of any ship.

Risk assessment and the safe manning certificate

If you talk to those responsible for issuing authorisations for safe manning certificates – the maritime administrations – the criteria under which they grant these certificates seems to be both reasonable and obvious. They will have rules and procedures for assessing the number of crew which will be able to operate that ship safely. It will be done, attendees were told, on the basis of risk assessment methodology, taking into account all the tasks and duties the crew must carry out, both in normal and emergency situations.

As with any risk assessment, there will be a desired outcome, in this case the safe operation of the ship and the protection of the marine environment. It will anticipate changes in circumstances, like changes of trade and take into account specific factors such as the frequency of port calls, the length of the voyage and its nature, ship design and layout, propulsion and equipment, cargo, maintenance policies, training requirements on board ship or coping with various emergencies.

But while all this seems plain and full of common sense, there will be other issues, open to interpretation, that arise over the assessment of what constitutes a safe number of crew members. The responsible authority will take this decision professionally, employing staff who can identify potential problems and are flexible enough to understand when manning proposals are less conventional and demand alternative solutions. Because of their experience, these responsible officers of the administration will hopefully be alert to operators 'trying it on' and will know the questions to ask about how peak demands are to be handled, the procedures for the rest regulations or how the plan will cope when people are ill.

They will hopefully not be influenced by operators suggesting that the other administration down the road will allow them to operate with fewer people and will have the will to turn down applications they believe are without merit. I would also suggest that those operating respectable registers probably would

rather not have the sort of people who are looking for cut-price manning deals and ultra minimum crews, and the speakers at the conference gave some confirmation of this.

But we also heard that the human element is a recurring theme in accident causation, particularly on ships where manpower is deliberately tight. This is arguably caused by the fact that if a couple of hands makes the difference between profit and loss on a voyage, fatigue or other preoccupations will be discovered as an important causal factor.

Fatigue

A pilot in my local port told me of a ship they were expecting one night and which turned up on schedule, but which appeared to be steaming full speed for the breakwater with nobody answering the VHF.

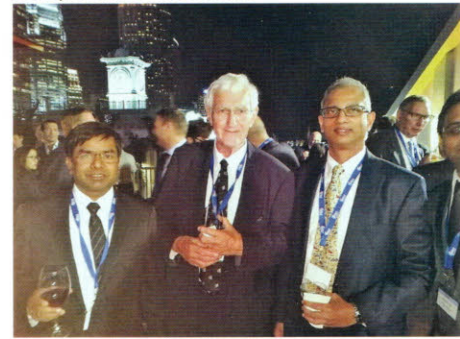
The pilot boat went alongside and although there was no ladder, the pilot managed to leap aboard and rush up to the bridge to find the Master alone, fast asleep in the pilot chair and completely oblivious to what was going on in the world. Another port where the pilot boat goes out to ships at anchor with an enormous hammer, to bang on the hull and let them know they are there, because there will be nobody awake. You can talk until the cows come home about declining standards, but it would be a brave person who would deny that tired people and not enough of them are contributors to these accidents.

As we heard from Kuba Szymanski FNI, the work done by Project Horizon and other fatigue studies has been very worthwhile, and a number of different ideas about the management of fatigue have emerged. You might suggest that if there were sufficient people on board in the first place, there wouldn't be issues of fatigue causing concern. And of course you would be right. But then I recall talking with one of the biggest Dutch short sea and middle water operators who said 'If we did things like stopping the Master watch keeping or paid for an extra mate, we simply wouldn't be able to compete with the lorries and more road haulage would be the only result'. Thus, all the time we come back to the grim lack of reward for sea transport and its competition which reflects so much thinking in this area.

Our debate on whether the manning of ships should be the responsibility of the IMO was very interesting – resulting in the audience being split almost exactly down the middle. As chairman, I should be scrupulously neutral, but I wonder whether IMO would be even capable of taking over such a role, if we were to demand



Lively debate after hours



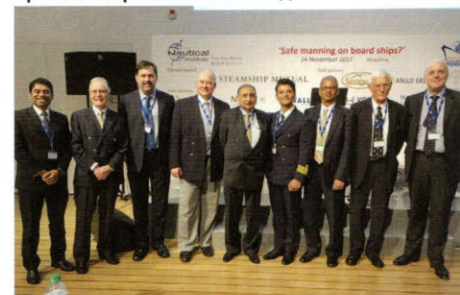
Conference chairman Michael Grey (centre)



Speaker David Patraiko FNI (r)



Speaker Capt Varun Rowat (l)



Conference speakers

that manning levels were to be decided on a ship by ship basis. Sure, there are some dodgy flags out there that will give you any number you might need, in order to get your business. But maybe it is for the port state control, or the more respectable registers, to illuminate the dirty work of the poor performers. And shouldn't the gradual surveillance of the IMO's Flag State Implementation teams weed out these doubtful flags over time?

Over the course of a brilliant meeting, here are some of the specific points that resonated with me. I am sure other attendees will have their own lists of highlights, and many great ideas to take away:

1. The people, person or agency who determine safe manning levels should understand the practical realities of what goes on aboard the ship. What are their qualifications? This is more than a clerky, or administrative role;
2. Aboard ship we cannot have sufficient highly skilled and adaptive people;
3. There is a need to manage numbers constructively, bearing in mind the realities of work and its demands upon the individual;
4. When we consider accidents that can be tracked back to inadequate numbers or skills, we are harshly reminded of issues of reputation and the pressures of competition;
5. The effects of responsibility and stress are clearly not properly understood;
6. We have been reminded of the importance of delegation as a factor in the role of leadership;
7. The over-arching need to support the Master has been re-emphasised;
8. Some people, notably the Master, are 'multi-tasking' to a ridiculous degree;
9. The huge pressures when a ship reaches port need to be more widely recognised; ('Ports are the killers', as one Master put it);
10. There is a need to gather and broadcast best manning practice (perhaps an important role for the NI).

Presentations from the conference are available to view on the Hong Kong SAR Branch website www.nautinsthk.com;

Michael Grey FNI



David Patraiko FNI, Pradeep Chawla FNI and Kuba Syzmanski FNI deep in conversation at The Nautical Institute Safe Manning Conference in Hong Kong (see p26).