

"... In fact, seafarers have very few options..." - Wendy King

In the June Master's Mariner, we brought your attention to the number of ships, stranded off the coast of China. Towards the end of last year and early this year, approximately 70 ships & 1500 seafarers were stranded, by May this had reduced to approximately 19, some unloading, whilst others sailed away and delivered their cargo to other nations in SE Asia. As of 02/06/2021, according to Queensland Rail News, 15 vessels remained stranded off the coast of China, a year after the stand-off first began. The economic impact of this is enormous, but the emotional and psychological impact on the seafarers is greater.



However, these vessels are not the only ones where seafarers remain stranded or confined. Currently, seafarers delivering produce all over the world, are confined to their vessels for months at a time. As reported in Marine Link, July 25th2021, 'The Delta variant devastating parts of Asia - home to many of the world's 1.7 million commercial seafarers - has prompted many nations to cut off land access to visiting crews, in some cases even for medical treatment. Just 2.5% of seafarers... have been vaccinated, the International Chamber of Shipping (ICS) estimates. The United Nations describes the situation as a humanitarian crisis at sea & says governments should class seafarers as essential workers. Given ships transport around 90% of the world's trade, the deepening crisis also poses a major threat to the supply chains we rely on for everything from oil and iron to food and electronics.'

So, what about vaccinations? Vaccinations are comprising a lot of the news articles in Australia at the moment. Pfizer or Astra Zeneca, availability, numbers vaccinated, target rates etc.... but what about seafarers? An article written by a seafarer from New Zealand, highlights many issues which most of us would not think about, here are some excerpts:

'Many seafarers are stuck on ships with no way to get home, get vaccinated, or even get ashore... through no fault of their own... Shipowners and governments need to work together to vaccinate seafarers.... our lives and livelihoods are on the line and without us, your supply chains would disappear. Radio New Zealand reported that the NZ Maritime Union suggested not allowing ships into NZ unless all seafarers on board are vaccinated... COVID is dangerous — but so are exhausted seafarers driving ships. To protect land crew, maybe ships should refuse to enter ports that aren't vaccinating seafarers and facilitating crew changes... anyone who understands international trade knows that's not practical... We're seeing reports of states requiring proof of COVID-19 vaccination for seafarers. If seafarers can't pass through international borders, this will cause delays and disruptions in the supply chain. Soon, unvaccinated people won't be allowed on commercial flights. But what about seafarers stuck on board ships?... Whose problem are they? Several countries are vaccinating seafarers in their ports... but not all seafarers work on ships going to those countries. Some countries only recognise a specific vaccine. Do governments really expect us to have every COVID vaccine so our ships can deliver their goods? Or is that just an inconvenient side effect not to be worried about, as long as orders arrive on time and there's enough toilet paper on shelves?... Since the start of the pandemic, seafarers have died after being refused treatment for non-COVID illnesses and injuries. Ships have had to carry dead crew members' bodies for weeks because countries won't allow the bodies to be repatriated.



We may work at sea, but we're human too... seafarers don't choose to get COVID, don't choose to get stuck on ships, don't choose where their ships go, and don't have any option but to work overseas — that's literally the job description. In fact, seafarers have very few options.'