



Quicker Return to Fit-For-Duty Status

Crewmembers that are unfit for duty due to injuries or illness can create a wide range of concerns for ship owners and fleet managers. In addition to concerns about the individual's health, an unfit-for-duty crewmember creates issues for a ship's operational capabilities, its port-of-call schedule, or even its ability to set sail. In this article, SphereMD will provide advice that is useful to quickly return a crewmember to fit for duty status in the U.S.

Communicate While Still At Sea

Even before a ship arrives at its intended or nearest port-of-call, a key step can be taken to increase the likelihood that an injured or ill crewmember can return to fit for duty status relatively quickly. Specifically, it is important to seek medical advice via e-mail or radio with a medical provider – e.g., a physician, physician assistant or nurse. Medical providers will describe the best course of treatment that can be achieved while the crewmember is still at sea. Such treatment will typically be relatively easy to implement, such as crewmember immobilization, ice treatments, heat treatments, use of anti-inflammatory medications, and adequate rest.

Starting with even such simple treatments will shorten healing time, decrease the likelihood of additional injuries, improve the crewmember's condition and raise his level of comfort.

Make Medical Appointments Prior to Arriving in Port

If two days in advance of port arrival the crewmember is still sustaining injuries, or still has illness symptoms, it is important to schedule a land-based medical appointment to take place as soon as possible. Such medical appointments can be made by making requests to either a Japan P&I Club Correspondent or a Medical Manager*. With up-to-date information about the crewmember's medical condition and the ship's arrival schedule, the Correspondent or Medical Manager will schedule an appointment with the appropriate medical facility, physician or medical specialist. Keep in mind that if the crewmember's condition improves before the ship arrives in port, the medical appointment can be easily cancelled.

Not being proactive and waiting to make medical arrangements can result in the use of hospital emergency rooms (ERs), which as will be described below, are problematic for a quick return to fit for duty status.

Share Work & Schedule Information with Physicians

Before the crewmember's medical examination and treatment, it is extremely important to provide U.S. physicians with information about the crewmember's responsibilities. In particular, such information should focus on flexibility in the crewmember's work duties. The more that U.S. physicians understand about flexibility in crewmember's duties, the more options they have in terms of granting fit for duty status. Examples of such flexibility include:

- Indicating that the crewmember's responsibilities allow for light duty restrictions (e.g., 2-hour work shifts with intermittent work breaks).
- Explaining that the crewmember's responsibilities mainly consist of bridge duty, for which remaining seated is acceptable.

Additionally, it is important to share the ship's port-of-call schedule with U.S. physicians. As U.S. physicians typically do not have confidence in other countries' medical infrastructures, it is beneficial to share with them any near-term visits to U.S. ports of call. With such information, U.S. physicians will gain confidence that adequate follow-up medical care can be provided, and will more likely approve fit for duty status. Even if the crewmember is not fit for duty, U.S. physicians may grant a "fit to sail" status if they know that U.S.-based medical care can be provided at an upcoming U.S. port-of-call. With a "fit to sail" status, the crewman is able to return to the ship, keeping it in compliance with its crewing certificate. Fit to sail status also eliminates unnecessary repatriation costs.

Crewmember work flexibility and ship schedule information can best be communicated to U.S. physicians by a Fit for Duty Form. Typically, a Medical Manager will be able to provide such a form, as well as work with U.S. physicians to ensure that the form's content is well-understood and taken into consideration.

Choose the Right Medical Provider

As SphereMD has described in the past, emergency rooms (ERs) in the U.S. should be avoided for cost reasons**. However, they should be avoided due to fit for duty reasons as well. ERs in the U.S. tend to issue more restrictive fit for duty statuses, and require follow-up that doesn't consider the movement of the ship. Furthermore, ERs are often unwilling to complete ship medical paperwork, as they are not required by U.S. law to do so. Sometimes, ER physicians omit any mention of fit for duty status, which means that those physicians must be re-visited (requiring extra time, paperwork and cost) to request fit for duty status.

The best way to avoid ERs and find the right medical provider in each port is to work with a Medical Manager. Medical Managers will ensure that the crewmember is taken to the right physician (e.g., an eye doctor for an eye injury) or to a clinic if there are no other options. Not only can clinics cover the majority (90%) of emergent or non-urgent care, they also provide quick service and are willing to fill out ship medical paperwork.

Summary

To achieve a quicker return to fit for duty status for an injured or ill crewmember, it is critical to immediately embark upon a medical course of action. This includes early communication and pre-arranged medical appointments. It also includes information about the crewmember's duties and the ship's schedule, as such information provides U.S. physicians with care options. Finally, this course of action includes the right choice of medical providers, which can be selected by a qualified Medical Manager.

* For a description of Medical Managers, please see Japan P&I News No. 803 "Medical Brokers in the U.S."

** Please see Japan P&I News No. 790: "Tips For Keeping U.S. Medical Costs Low"