

# Crew Welfare

## Caring for Covid... and other medical emergencies at sea



**F**uture Care describes itself an international medical management, cost containment service, and telemedical service provider exclusively to the maritime industry, serving shipowners and P&I Clubs in fulfilling the medical needs of seafarers, aboard ship and on land.

The company was founded in 1998 by CEO and President Christina DeSimone, who hails from a family steeped in the traditions of both Brooklyn longshoremen and disability care, who transferred her medical case management service for land-based employees to the maritime community. Future Care was the first Global Telemedical and case management service to care for seafarers in the commercial maritime industry, both at sea and onshore, and has grown steadily since, its employees now numbering 150.

Today Future Care forms part of the larger International SOS group, which can draw on 11,000 health, security and logistics experts to provide support and assistance at over 1,000 locations in 90 countries. Its services include 24/7 first response to emergency calls from ship captains, physician advice at

sea from its expert medical team, and ongoing medical case management even after a seafarer has come ashore.

Future Care's Global Chief Medical Officer is Dr Arthur Diskin, who formerly occupied the same role for Royal Caribbean Cruise Line and before that was Medical Director for Carnival Cruise Line, meaning he brings extensive maritime experience to the role as well as his specialist medical expertise in emergency and critical care.

He joined the company shortly after leaving RCCL in 2016, initially as Future Care's Medical Director who would liaise with ships when they had a medical emergency onboard and gradually adopting a wider role. Dr Diskin's years of experience with the cruise industry and the ageing demographic of its guests meant he was well acquainted with dealing with cases of serious illness at sea, including outbreaks of highly communicable diseases such as norovirus and Legionnaires' disease. Indeed, cruiseships were identified as potential 'super spreaders' of Covid itself in the early days of the pandemic.



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**Dr Arthur Diskin**



When the pandemic hit, “there was a tremendous void in the commercial maritime industry of people who understood both maritime and Covid,” he tells SMI. He quickly became a recognised expert in that field, delivering seminars on the subject to maritime audiences, including last year’s CMA conference in Connecticut, as well as Future Care clients.

Future Care really covers anything that relates to health care of seafarers, he explains, with a special focus on case management that includes not only ‘Part One’ emergency response to critical incidents, where a crew member need to be evacuated from a ship, but also “Part Two” health care for that individual ashore, until they show maximum medical improvement and are declared fit for duty again or not. They also advise ships on what medical equipment they should carry, run validation clinics, offer mental health care support services and even offer legal advice on medical matters.

Specifically on Covid, the company offers testing in ports around the world that is either incident-related or routine pre- and post-embarkation, either antigen, PCR or both. It is also involved in writing or tweaking company policies on Covid, as well as helping with ‘pratique’ or free passage of ships into port in instances where there has been a case of the virus.

What ship operators need to do at present, says Dr Diskin, is “continued surveillance for outbreaks and to ensure immunisation.” He has gone on record as stating that “the shipowner has a duty to provide a safe environment onboard the ship by using antigen testing to minimise risks to crew and to demonstrate the ship is free of illness prior to port arrival and crew repatriation.” He has also said the shipowner’s ‘duty of care’ includes “overcoming vaccine hesitancy even if making it mandatory,” and he tells SMI that there is “absolutely no problem mixing and matching” different types of vaccine and booster jabs.

Clearly the problems facing the maritime industry over Covid remain major. Emergence of the Omicron variant may have resulted in a lower rate of serious or critical illness but its very high rate of communicability raises other issues, particularly with Asian countries like China, so critical to the global supply chain, trying to enforce a ‘zero Covid’ policy. Indeed, countries like Hong Kong that were initially very successful on suppressing Covid, are now not doing so well. Ships can find themselves

placed in quarantine and waiting days, or even weeks, before being able to dock.

“Immunisation and (rapid) antigen testing aboard ships” are the two key weapons against Covid in shipping’s arsenal going forward, he reiterates, including of all suppliers, inspectors and agents coming aboard the vessel. Interestingly PCR testing was more widely used in the maritime community early on, he notes, but this now poses problems since positive results can continue to show up for some time after infection clears.

Companies also need to have a policy in place on how to deal with incidents of one or more crew members testing positive before arrival in port, especially with landside policies differing so greatly according to the Covid policy of that particular country or region.

In fact, Future Care espouses a ‘Port Ahead’ strategy whereby a ship anticipates the likely reaction of a port rather than waiting for it to happen, and has a contact in each port they’re going to visit to help them locally with managing any problem. As part of the larger group International SOS, Future Care is well informed of the health care capabilities in different ports and of different port agents, Dr Diskin says, and can “stay up to date and know what to expect”.

Overall, the Covid pandemic has served to show up both the vital importance and evolving technology of telemedical services, he believes. “The communications bandwidth a ship can receive, coupled with smaller, less expensive medical devices means that we’re about to see a greater degree of access to shoreside medical support as we’ve identified the need for during Covid. We’ve had the perfect storm to develop those services and I think we’ll continue to see them develop over the next couple of years.”

Christina DeSimone adds: “Future Care provides a Telehealth program that includes global mental health support, covid testing, primary health Care and emergency medical advice services. There has never been a more proactive awakening moment than now that the Covid pandemic has threatened our world and our shipping community. Telehealth in maritime is now truly on the top of our shipping communities agenda and for this moment and the future of maritime Telehealth, we are grateful.” ●