

Standardisation of vaccination essential for seafarers, says Synergy

The founder of shipmanager Synergy Marine, Rajesh Unni, sees a perfect storm brewing, with ports turning away unvaccinated seafarers. This will further aggravate problems relating to crew changes

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[Inderpreet Walia@w_inderpreet](mailto:Inderpreet.Walia@w_inderpreet) Inderpreet.walia@informa.com

Vaccine passport protocols in line with World Health Organisation recommendations need to be followed globally as vaccinated seafarers are critical to keeping the world supplied with personal protective equipment and vital goods, argues chief executive Capt Unni



SEAFARERS NEED TO BE VACCINATED TO FACILITATE THEIR MOVEMENT ACROSS BORDERS, ACCORDING TO CAPT UNNI.

SEAFARER vaccine passports are an important step to passing through port checks, but what is more significant is the universal standardisation of vaccination for crew members that can allow them to sail freely, according to shipmanager Synergy Marine.

Disjointed nationalised vaccination policies are being enforced at ports around the world, thereby further complicating crewing problems, said its chief executive Rajesh Unni.

He fears big problems ahead if countries insist on crew being inoculated with a particular vaccine, while other vaccines may not be recognised.

“An average ship has a mix of at least two nationalities on board, and sometimes as many as six or even more,” he said in an interview with Lloyd's List. “This makes the current model of vaccinating by nationality a huge challenge.”

“What if the Sinovac vaccine given to Chinese or Filipino seafarers is not accepted by health regimes of certain countries?”

“There should be some level of understanding that all the vaccines have to come through the World Health Organisation,” Capt Unni said. He noted that the “industry should recognise a particular set of vaccines to be globally accepted, which is likely to be achieved through an independent body.”

Although countries should have vaccinated seafarers as part of their key worker status, he said that only few of them prioritised the mariners as frontline workers and began vaccinating them.

“Seafarers need to be protected through vaccination as soon as possible to facilitate their safe movement across borders, as they are on long tours of duty away from their home country.

“Clear vaccine passport protocols in line with WHO recommendations need to be followed globally as vaccinated seafarers are critical to keeping the world supplied with personal protective equipment and vital goods.”

While the supply of vaccines remains monopolised by governments, there are countries where seafarers can get vaccines by way of private healthcare.

“Predominantly, I think that we would still be guided by different rules (for vaccinations) by the countries, but we should keep the options of private clinics, as and when they open for jabs,” he said.

He believes that the cost of getting vaccines for the crew is significantly less as compared with the exorbitant cost for crew changes or ship deviations given that many countries are making vaccination of crew a condition for entering ports.

At present, the company is carrying out many more crew changes than it could six months ago. However, the situation is still far from perfect, he said.

According to the latest estimates, some 200,000 seafarers are currently affected by the crew change crisis, down by about half from the height of the crisis in July last year, when more than 400,000 were over-running their contracts.

“A similar number of seafarers have been waiting to join ships and earn a living. However, I must warn that the crisis is far from over, and the number could rise again as governments reintroduce stricter border control and travel restrictions due to new coronavirus variants.”

Key crew supply nations such as India and the Philippines are going into lockdown again, he said, adding that “the fact that ports are turning away unvaccinated seafarers is further aggravating the situation and creating a perfect storm for global seaborne trade.”