

"DOCTOR AT SEA" a monthly Column in The Islander Magazine

Drugs, Yachts and Yachties

Just before sitting down to write, I texted my son and mentioned that I thought I would write this month's column on drugs. Quick as a flash he texted back and queried whether it would be "about drugs or was I experimenting with drug induced journalistic inspiration". Hopefully you will be able to tell the difference but performance enhancement and escape from the pressures of reality are powerful forces which drive some people to seek support from drugs – even yachties, who already perform above average in fitness and personality and whose everyday life would represent an attractive escape from reality for the rest of the population.

My impression after just over a year in the yachting industry was that drug abuse is very low profile to the extent that it may be considered insignificant but, more recently, this impression is being challenged in conversation with yachties who unburden their concerns about colleagues using drugs and the associated concerns for the health and safety of themselves and their vessel. Cocaine seems to be top of the list but what else, how much, how often and how widespread is anyone's guess.

Drug testing in safety critical jobs has been accepted in industry for many years and is generally written into contracts of employment. Testing can take place at selection and randomly thereafter and as well as after an accident or incident. Some yachts have a similar contractual prohibition on the use of illegal drugs but not many use drug testing and organisations such as the MCA do not insist on drug tests but one wonders how long before more and more insurance companies exert their influence or before careful owners make more stringent moves to protect their expensive vessels.

Urine samples reflect drug use over the past few days and there are simple dipstick kits for immediate testing although more elaborate laboratory-based tests (including tamper evident seals and witnessed sampling) may be needed to strengthen the conclusion if a reputation is at stake. Saliva based testing covers a similar period as urine but is more convenient and there is less scope for interfering with the sample. However, a much longer window of detection is provided by hair drug testing – drugs become encased in the growing hair shaft and one and a half inches of hair represents about ninety days hair growth. The technology is now very well developed but obviously cannot be done on-site although laboratory analysis is used increasingly in major companies and law enforcement agencies.

In my experience, a cautious vessel may require a screening urine dipstick as part of the pre-employment assessment and this simple procedure can be a sufficient deterrent to would-be offenders. Similarly some contracts of employment are strict about the use of illegal drugs but decisions on dismissal may need to be backed up by some analytical evidence if the circumstantial evidence is ambiguous. Also some captains take a rather more conciliatory view on rehabilitation of the offender although this could be a high-risk policy in a small tight-knit on-board team.

One weak unregulated link in this chain is the behaviour of guests and charter groups who may disregard health and safety concerns, and their own personal health risks, but who jeopardise the vessel's standing if put through a surprise on-board inspection and risk criminal charges. Experienced captains have no doubt had to exert their authority on occasions and will have a number of interesting tales to tell.

There is clearly a different problem if a senior person like a captain has avoided all these more recently introduced precautions but develops a habit in later career. This could develop as an antidote to the stress of the continuous responsibilities and ever-expanding regulatory hassle, or perhaps struggling to achieve a happy work-life balance after years at sea, or maybe just one more horizon of excitement. It is this particular scenario of the affected captain which can raise concerns amongst younger crew members. Coming out of the woodwork and seeking help would make a lot of sense. The vessels are phenomenally valuable but the lives of the crew are even more precious and no one in the industry wants a wake-up call catastrophe.

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