

US Coast Guard medical evacuations

With limited medical capabilities on most seagoing vessels, it is not uncommon for vessel masters to request medical assistance from coastal governmental agencies. Karen Hildebrandt shares her recent experience.

Members are sometimes faced with crewmembers or passengers being injured or becoming ill at sea. Club cover includes the Member's liability to pay hospital, medical and other necessary expenses incurred in relation to a seafarer's or passenger's illness or injury including the cost of repatriating the crewmember to his/her home and sending a substitute to the vessel. The Club also covers the expense of diverting the vessel for the purpose of securing treatment for an ill or injured party onboard.

In certain cases where the crewmember or passenger is thought to urgently need medical treatment it is possible to request assistance from the U.S. Coast Guard ("Coast Guard") if the vessel is operating in or near U.S. waters, to evacuate the ill or injured parties to a shore side hospital. As more fully discussed below, medical evacuations (Medevacs) are carried out only if certain guidelines are met.

Coast Guard Medevac policy and procedures for merchant vessels is set forth in U.S. Coast Guard Addendum to the National Search & Rescue Supplement (CGADD). Typically, requests for medical assistance are initially received by the nearest Search and Rescue ("SAR") Coordinator.

The SAR Coordinator is charged with completing a Medevac checklist in order to rapidly develop an accurate description of the patient's condition. Masters and crew should be immediately prepared to relay the following information:

- Patient's name, age, gender and nationality;
- Patients' respiration, pulse rate, temperature and blood pressure;
- Location of pain and/or nature of illness or injury (including cause);
- Symptoms and medication given (including type, time and amounts)
- Time of last consumption and ability to eat/drink and walk;
- Contents of the vessel's medical chest;



- Whether a suitable clear area is available for helicopter landing/hoisting
- Name, address and phone number of vessel's agent; and
- Last port of call, next port of call and ETA of next port of call.

When deciding whether a case is sufficiently urgent to justify the risks involved with a Medevac, Coast Guard personnel will confer with medical personnel, preferably Coast Guard flight surgeons who are trained to evaluate on five points:

1. What symptoms does the patient have?
2. What specific treatment do they need enroute and at destination?
3. When do they need it (how soon)?
4. Where can they get it (destination)?
5. Can the Coast Guard safely meet the window of opportunity?

There are many situations where a helicopter or boat evacuation creates greater risk to the patient than simply monitoring the case. In all Medevac operations, the Coast Guard considers the risks of the mission against the risk to the patient and the responding Coast Guard resource. Factors routinely considered by the Coast Guard include the following:

- The patient's clinical status;
- The patient's probable clinical course if a Medevac is not performed;
- Medical capabilities of responding Coast Guard personnel and equipment;
- Aircraft endurance;
- Daylight or night operations;
- Prevailing weather, sea and other environmental conditions; and
- Contractual arrangements between vessels & hospitals or commercial medical advisory systems

Medevacs can be extremely hazardous to both patient and responders because of severe environmental conditions frequently encountered at sea, and from dangers inherent in transferring a patient from vessel to vessel or from a vessel to a helicopter. When deemed required, the Coast Guard does not

seek to recover the costs associated with Medevacs from the recipients of those emergency services. However, 14 United States Code § 88 (c) makes it a federal felony for anyone to knowingly and willfully cause the Coast Guard to attempt to save lives and property when no help is needed. Given the significant costs associated with Coast Guard Medevacs, penalties include up to 6 years in prison and a maximum fine of \$250,000, and the liability for all resulting costs incurred by the Coast Guard.

Club cover for such fines and penalties would be discretionary. Each case will be decided by our Club Board of Directors on its merits, considering the circumstances of the case, and the Directors would need to satisfy themselves that the member had taken reasonable steps to prevent the event giving rise to the fine. Accordingly, crewmembers should be reminded not to embellish or misrepresent a patient's medical condition when communicating with SAR Coordinators.

Medevacs continue to be an invaluable resource to Members dealing with medical emergencies at sea. However, Medevacs pose unique risks to patients, responders and vessels and will only be authorized by the USCG after the potential benefits are weighed against the inherent dangers of such operations.

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