

ITF Seafarers Trust

Call for expressions of interest:

Research on social isolation, depression, and suicide in seafarers (SIDS).

Background

There is continuing uncertainty about the mental health consequences of working as a seafarer, notably whether there is an excess risk of suicide. The Trust recently held a workshop to explore current knowledge and perspectives on SIDS. The report from this meeting and the associated review paper on the current state of knowledge may be accessed at Seafarerstrust.org/publications.

The Trust has developed a series of strategic priorities following the workshop and these are listed in the report. These include investigative work to help define contributory risk factors and the scope for intervention. The Trust is seeking collaborating centres to take these items forward so that the dimensions of SIDS in seafarers are better defined, enabling a coherent and valid approach to risk management to be developed and promoted throughout the international maritime industry.

Centres interested in participating in this work should forward the information requested in Appendix 1 to The Seafarers Trust by September 1, 2017. The Trust will review the responses to this call and will then ask those centres that make the most relevant proposals to submit a more detailed and fully costed tender for carrying out investigations, reporting their findings and assisting with their dissemination.

The research questions to be addressed

1. What is the relationship between living and working at sea, in particular social isolation, and mental distress or mental ill-health, both short and long term? How do these factors contribute to suicide and to unfitness to continue working at sea?

It is envisaged that a series of studies aimed at particular sub-sets of these relationships would be needed. Review of data from other populations that can be validly extrapolated to seafarers may make a contribution to addressing this. An important facet of the answer will relate to the proportion of depression and other forms of mental ill-health in seafarers that can be attributed to social isolation and similarly the proportion of suicides can be attributed to the presence of short or long term depression, or other mental ill-health prior to the event.

2. What is the effect of population variables within the international seafaring population on these relationships?

Relevant variables include time at sea, rank and department, country of origin and culture, demographic factors such as age, gender, family status

3. Is there an excess risk of suicide in seafarers compared to other groups in the working population, if so are any sub-sets of the population who are at particularly high risk and can any aspects of life and work at sea be identified as contributory

causes?

Obtaining reliable information on suicide risks is difficult, there may be socio-cultural reasons for avoiding the attribution of the death to suicide and these may be exacerbated if a diagnosis of suicide carries financial penalties for their dependents. In addition a significant number of 'disappearances' at sea occur and it is generally considered that a fair proportion of these are hidden suicides.

To provide a fair view on suicide it is important to look at suicide in seafarers not only when they are at sea, but also while in port and on leave, as these may be associated with aspects of the seafaring lifestyle.

4. What methods of intervention have the potential to be used in seafaring populations to reduce any adverse effects of seafaring on mental ill-health and suicide.

This will require critical evaluation of interventions used in other settings and consideration of whether they can be applied to seafarers. Advice on implementation and on evaluation of effectiveness should form part of any assessment. The synergy between interventions focused on these questions and those aiming to enhance wellness more generally should be reviewed.

The Trust will look more favourably on proposals that aim to explore some of these questions in depth rather than less well constructed proposals that attempt to cover all questions in a superficial way. All proposals should build on and not duplicate the report of the workshop and the associated background paper or other published studies.

How will the Trust use the outputs from these studies

The Trust has two main reasons for commissioning these studies.

- To encourage the sector to take steps to reduce mental distress and its serious consequences in seafarers. The case for action needs to be supported by valid information on absolute and relative risk based on comparisons of risk both within the seafaring population and with other relevant groups. Good employers are likely to co-operate willingly, but the Trust will also work with other agencies such as the ITF Affiliates, seafarer centres and mission organisations to create climate of opinion that spreads good practice to all ships and flags.
- To ensure that seafarers suffering from mental ill-health or the dependents of those who have committed suicide are not stigmatised and are entitled to the same benefit and support arrangements as those with other forms of illness or who have died while working in the industry. This will include ensuring that medical selection processes for work at sea do not unjustifiably discriminate against such seafarers except insofar as it is required to safeguard maritime safety and health.

Appendix 1

Expression of interest in Seafarers Trust Research on social isolation, depression, and suicide in seafarers (SIDS).

Contact details

Project estimates

The research question(s) that the proposal addresses (up to 300 words)

Statement of the project's objectives (up to 300 words)

Background to the project (up to 400 words). Please include details of similar work and details of how this application differs.

Project's deliverables and statements of how they could be utilised to improve seafarer mental health. If the project could lead to the development of a product or process, give details. (up to 300 words)

Appendix 1 to be returned to SIDS@seafarerstrust.org by September 1, 2017

Brief outline of the project methodology (up to 500 words)

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If collaboration with other organisation(s) is proposed, state the organisation(s), the nature of the collaboration and the level of financial and/or 'in-kind' support that might be provided by the collaborator(s). Explain how it is envisaged that data collection will be facilitated by through contacts in maritime administrations, ship operators, maritime insurance and maritime healthcare providers, as well as through the national seafarers unions.
(up to 400 words)

Please list your four most recent publications.

Please list up to four relevant publications from other members of your team.