

MEDICAL CARE ONBOARD CRUISE SHIPS

When vacationers embark on a cruise, the last thing they want to think about is the need for medical attention. The ICCL is dedicated to helping the cruise industry provide a safe, healthy, secure and caring ship environment for both passengers and crew. Among those services that illustrate this commitment to passenger welfare are the shipboard medical infirmaries found on all ICCL member vessels. ICCL cruise operators are committed to providing excellent first response and emergency care to passengers until they can be transferred to a shoreside medical facility.

All of the ICCL cruise lines operating in the North American market have volun-



*SOME CRUISE LINES
ESTABLISH LINKS TO
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COMMUNICATIONS*

tarily provided medical facilities onboard their vessels, even though neither international law nor U.S. law requires them to do so.

The cruise industry has taken an active role in addressing the quality of shipboard medical care. In 1995, the ICCL and its member lines formed a Medical Facilities Working Group to develop industry-wide guidelines for the facilities, staffing, equip-

ment and procedures in medical infirmaries on cruise ships. This effort coincided with that of the American College of Emergency Physicians (ACEP), the nation's leading and largest professional organization of such specialists, representing over 20,000 practicing emergency and other physicians in the United States and abroad. ACEP's Section of Cruise Ship and Maritime Medicine is specifically dedicated to training, education and research in the advancement of shipboard medical care.

As a result of cooperative efforts between experienced cruise ship physicians and the ACEP, all ICCL cruise line operators have agreed to meet or exceed the requirements of the ACEP Health Care Guidelines for Cruise Ship Medical Facilities.

The medical facilities guidelines were put into place to provide: (1) reasonable emergency medical care for passengers and crew; (2) the capability to stabilize patients and/or initiate reasonable diagnostic and therapeutic intervention; and (3) the evacuation of seriously ill or injured patients when deemed necessary by a shipboard physician.

Included in the policies are procedures regarding 24-hour medical services and staff. Personnel are board certified or hold equivalent international certification, or have general practice and emergency or critical care experience.

Personnel must also be conversant in English, possess a current



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valid medical license, and have three years of clinical experience, including minor surgical skills.

The ACEP medical facilities guidelines specify the type and quantity of equipment that must be available onboard, such as x-ray, defibrillators, EKG, wheelchairs, portable oxygen, to name a few, as well as medicines that must be maintained onboard.

A number of cruise lines have established links with shoreside medical institutions that provide consultation. In some cases, they use Internet or satellite-based communication to assist in the management of complex and emergency situations. Satellite-transmitted radiographs or x-rays, live video and audio, and links to specialists around the world, including the medical directors at company headquarters, are a new and invaluable addition to onboard medical services.

Cruise lines and travel agents encourage cruise vacationers to obtain travel medical insurance, to travel with extra supplies of prescription medications and devices and to fully disclose pre-existing medical conditions before sailing. They point out that many regular health insurance plans do not provide coverage when travelers are outside the United States.

Prior to booking a cruise, passengers should assess and consider individual

health requirements when deciding on the length and type of cruise. A person with a serious medical condition should consult with their personal physician before taking any type of vacation.

It is important to note that the ACEP guidelines are not intended to constitute medical advice, or to establish standards of care applicable to the industry as a whole. They reflect consensus among member lines of the facilities and staffing needs considered appropriate aboard cruise vessels, within the recognized limitations of the sea environment. However, the prac-

**FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT
MEDICAL FACILITIES GUIDELINES
ONBOARD CRUISE SHIPS:**

International Council of Cruise Lines -
www.iccl.org/policies/medical.htm

American College of Emergency Physicians -
www.acep.org/1,593,0.html

tices of individual cruise lines and ship-board physicians may vary from ship to ship based on several factors including the size of the vessel, number of passengers and crew, ship construction, and length and itinerary of voyage.

While the cruise industry is aware that some of the passengers may have health needs during a cruise, a cruise ship is not a floating hospital or comprehensive medical provider. However, increasingly sophisticated equipment and extensive training have made cruise vessels one of the safest places to vacation in the travel industry.



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