

New EU Regulations and the Disabled Sea-Traveller

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In the last decade, elderly people have taken to sea cruising in ever-increasing number. They can make up to half of the passenger complement on some ships. Shipping companies have encouraged them on to voyages and provided disability adapted cabins, on-board wheel-chairs and staff assistance to meet their needs. Many have mobility problems or have visual, hearing or intellectual impairment, are visually, auditory or intellectually impaired and most are on medications for chronic illness. They are partly attracted by the 24 hour availability of nursing and medical staff, and have been dependent upon the assistance of crew members for accessing the ship and their quarters. In some cases, wheelchairs and scooters have blocked corridors, creating a potential hazard for all passengers in an on-board emergency. New EU Regulations may have an adverse impact on the actual aid crew members may provide, but they will ensure that staff are trained in handling these passengers identifying their needs and will do so safely.

In December 2012, an EU regulation-(1177/2010 on Maritime Passenger Rights) was directed at the public travelling by sea and inland waterways inside European boundaries. This ruling affects cruise ships sailing under a European flag. A cruise is defined as a voyage of more than two days, which is why some of the ferry companies offer "Mini Cruises" for longer crossings.

Today's cruise ships tend to have multi-national crews. Crew members, representing 30 different nationalities, is common place. Within these nationalities there may be cultural attitudes towards physical and mental disabilities that differ, or are in conflict with, what Western Europeans may consider as natural and normal.

My wife - a Russian national when we married -was amazed 20 years ago at how many people in UK, with mobility or obvious mental health problems ventured into normal society, instead of being restrained to home, as was the norm in her native land. Even then, equipment such as ramps and lowered telephones were readily provided for wheel-chair users. Now, two decades later, disability aware-ness and disability assistance are almost taken for granted here in UK. This does not apply to some of the old Soviet satellite states and third world countries, from which many crew members are recruited. In accordance with the new Regulation, cruise company personnel and, if appropriate, terminal operators, personnel of companies offering cruises to the general public and, if appropriate, the personnel of terminal operators, should receive disability-related training. This disability assistance training is aimed at personnel who are, or could be, required to offer direct assistance to disabled persons and persons with reduced mobility or special needs. In cruise ships, this is almost all the crew on board. When giving assistance, it is important that the person providing assistance is aware of the functional limitations the person being assisted may have.

Special needs, such as mobility issues, tend to be obvious, but other features may not be visible, such as deafness, dizziness, or stability problems, and cognitive unawareness of the effect of the ship's motion on the sea.

The dignity of the person being assisted has also to be considered. During a ship's emergency this may not be a priority, but for day-to-day running of the vessel it is an important factor. Going on holiday is a high stress time, with heightened stress particularly for those with special needs, if a ship emergency situation occurs. Transfer from a seat to a wheel chair can be accomplished in a dignified, low-key way using equipment provided and the use of correct techniques. Transfers can be handled badly, putting handler or handled, or both, at risk of a manual handling injury, and is also a cause of unnecessary anxiety. The health and safety of the crew member is a factor that must be kept in mind.

Basic knowledge of First Aid and manual handling techniques are a requirement for all seafarers. The new Regulation clearly states that any travelling passengers who have mobility problems or special needs, as defined in this legislation, must now travel with a responsible companion/carer to attend to normal day to day needs. Only in an emergency will crew be called upon to lift and carry, or physically move a passenger. A crew member offering a steady arm to assist the passenger to the toilet door is acceptable, but any further assistance is to be denied.

Specific medical needs are catered for at any time under this ruling, as well as any personal security issues. Emergencies are covered by the Passenger Assistance Party, an emergency crew group, dedicated to seeking and assisting passengers registered as requiring assistance in a ship emergency.

The crews must have training to comply with the requirements of Annex iV, Part A and B, of Regulation, with course participants learning about appropriate responses to passengers with different disabilities, special needs, or impairments. Courses define "disability", and explore the obstacles disabled passengers may face, and crew members learn the correct crew responses to make passengers feel secure and comfortable. Disabled persons and persons with reduced mobility can experience feelings of vulnerability during travel due to their dependence on the assistance

provided. Course content considers how some very independent persons, reliant on wheelchairs, may not want crew to constantly assist them and teaches crew members how to react to a passenger's disability, disfigurement or facial deformity. Participants gain skills in providing assistance with dignity, to disabled persons and persons with reduced mobility to embark, disembark, or transit when moving around the vessel, especially in bad weather.

They are taught how to deal with blind, or visually-impaired people, deaf and hard-of-hearing passengers, and those with intellectual and learning difficulties and mental health problems. The needs and handling of Assistance dogs on ships, whether for the blind, deaf, or other roles in which a canine partner is used, is also covered.

Mobility aids such as scooters, wheelchairs, walkers, canes also are studied, as well as the best types of equipment to assist disabled persons and how to handle such equipment. The use of gangways and ladders, and the challenge they give to persons with mobility issues, is discussed, together with the assistance methods and equipment to safeguard the safety and dignity of disabled whilst transiting the ship.

Tendering involves transfer of passengers from ship to quay, by either the ship's boats or by locally hired craft ,Transporting passengers ashore via tender, when the vessel is anchored or sometimes proceeding very slowly to transport passengers ashore, is potentially very hazardous particularly for the less mobile. it is important that crew understand the processes, and the need for reliable and professional assistance to ensure disabled passengers are transferred safely.

Cruise shipping companies give much attention to the needs of disabled and vulnerable passengers and provide equipment and accommodation to meet those with special needs. Passengers voyage in an unstable environment, however, subject to ship movement, ship-board obstacles and ship to shore transit risks. The new regulation will protect crew from manual handling hazards and ensure that disabled travellers travel with an attendant to support their particular requirements at sea and ashore. The compulsory staff training should ensure that this group of traveller is treated with understanding and dignity and provided with personal support in time of emergency.

The Health and Safety section is part of my life as a Safety Training Officer, and i teach other cruise vessel operations, such as Sea Survival Techniques, Maritime Fire Fighting, Personal and Work Safety and Security issues, First Aid Training. All endeavour to ensure that passengers, whether mobile or disabled, travel safely and that crew are trained to meet their needs and do so without hazard to themselves.

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Photographs by B Hampson

