



A Sea Change In Hygiene Aboard Ships

A holistic and strategic approach to hygiene can safeguard the health of shipping crews, even tiding them over the pandemic. Joyce Tan, Product Marketing Manager at Wilhelmsen Ships Service, explains more.

It has been more than a year since SARS-CoV-2 first appeared on the global stage and governments, businesses and individuals are still trying to navigate a disrupted world. Things once taken for granted – open borders, human interaction, personal hygiene – have come to the fore, and the international shipping industry is one that has had to adapt quickly to sink or swim.

One of the most affected are our seafarers, who spend long periods of time aboard vessels and who now may not get to disembark at their destination due to restrictions on crew changes at different ports. This new operating environment has real implications for the health of seafarers.

Being away from home and on the waves for extended shifts can take a toll on their mental well-being, while their physical health could be threatened by outbreaks such as COVID-19 among the crew. One only needs to look at the incidents on recreational cruise ships at the start of the pandemic to understand how badly COVID-19 infections could spread in a confined space out at sea.

Joyce Tan, Product Manager, Marine Products at Wilhelmsen Ships Service (WSS), thinks that hygiene is the lynchpin to the shipping industry's continued and safe operations in this pandemic. "How we constantly deal with day-to-day hygiene practices is what makes the

difference in protecting crews' health and not obstructing operations within the vessel, while also meeting the guidelines for mitigation of COVID-19 among ships."

Making waves in the right places

Keeping a ship hygienic at all times might seem like a daunting task, but Tan emphasises that a focused approach on specific spaces could go a long way towards maintaining a safe environment for seafarers.

"It is inevitable, with so much time spent in the galley and accommodation areas, that these areas of constant human influx become fertile breeding grounds for germs and bacteria," she says, adding that particular attention should also be paid to environmental cleaning of high-touch surfaces and items, such as light switches, door handles, tables, chairs and sinks.

“There has been a huge increase in the number of cleaning products on the market, each claiming efficacy while not providing clear instructions for use.”

Joyce Tan
Product Marketing Manager for Marine Products
On the rise of cleaning products in the market



Establishing enhanced routine cleaning and disinfection procedures on board vessels is a critical step in reducing exposures and the risk of infection. For such routine cleaning and disinfection practices to be truly effective, however, the right tools and products need to be available to crew members. This is where things can get confusing – there has been a huge increase in the number of cleaning products on the market, each claiming efficacy while not providing clear instructions for use.

Compounding the problem are fake coronavirus cleaners and antimicrobial agents that have proliferated during the pandemic. This may create a false and distorted sense of security, Tan warns. For ship crews, this false sense of security could “spring a leak” that leads to a COVID-19 outbreak.

A deeper understanding of cleaning and disinfection

The key to knowing which cleaning product to use is to understand the difference between cleaning and disinfection. As stated in an interim World Health Organization (WHO) guidance document, mechanical cleaning actions comprising of brushing or scrubbing can eliminate and reduce dirt, debris, and

other organic matter (such as blood, secretions, excretions). However, they do not have the ability to eradicate the presence of microorganisms.

“Cleaning products that do not possess any antibacterial or antimicrobial properties may clean a surface but not eliminate the bacteria and germs on it,” Tan explains.

Studies have shown that COVID-19 viruses can remain viable for hours – even days – on surfaces made from a variety of materials. The cleaning of visibly dirty surfaces, followed by disinfection using a product that contains antimicrobial ingredients, is a best-practice measure for the prevention of virus spread and transmission, Tan says.

WSS’ Gamazyme and EasyClean range of products provide a one-stop solution for such clean-and-disinfect applications including maintaining sanitary conditions on board. For high-contact surfaces that make repeated cleaning and disinfection unfeasible, it may be more effective to cover them in an antimicrobial coating such as WSS’ newly launched Anti Microbial Active Coating, Tan adds.

The patented technology binds the antimicrobial ingredient (silane quaternary ammonium) into a long molecular chain, making it effective and long-lasting when sprayed onto

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On using products with antimicrobial properties as a best-practice in cleanliness and hygiene

many different types of surfaces.

Towards a future anchored on hygienic best practices

In addition to having good products for cleaning and disinfection, Tan notes that the standardisation of how these chemicals and coatings are applied is just as important.

“Ship crews are in regular rotation and often bring very different experiences of cleaning products and procedures,” she says. This is where education and training of ship crews come into play, facilitated by clear usage instructions and product documentation.

“At WSS, our products and equipment come

with easy-to-understand instructions, wall charts, dosing charts, product data sheets and safety data sheets, all easily available online. This helps ensure that the standard of hygiene can be maintained between crew changes to reduce coronavirus transmission,” Tan explains.

With hygiene as the bedrock, the international shipping industry can build resilience even against the uncertainties of new coronavirus strains that could evade the protection conferred by currently available vaccines.


“Prevention is better than cure and pandemics are no different. The international shipping industry can chart a path in this new normal by following cleanliness and hygiene procedures - therefore ensuring that the crew on board can continue to live and work in a safe and healthy environment,” Tan says.



Maintaining a clean and hygienic working environment for seafarers requires the right products and team effort - everyone has a part to play.



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