

Maritime New Zealand Guidelines

MARINE GUIDANCE NOTICE ISSUE 14 – NOVEMBER 2009

PRESCRIBED MEDICATION AND SAFETY

This guidance is for:

- vessel owners and operators
- masters
- seafarers
- medical practitioners.

Purpose

This guidance notice provides advice on the management of risk associated with prescribed medications, following a recommendation from the Transport Accident Investigation Commission.

Background

The master of a ship involved in an accident was using prescribed medication, which may have contributed to the accident.

The master was prescribed a drug that had insomnia as a side effect. He was later prescribed sleeping tablets to assist with his insomnia. The employer was not aware of this, although had been informed that the master was having sleep-related problems.

Advice for seafarers

From time to time, you may need to take medication prescribed by a doctor, or you will obtain medication from a pharmacist. Taking medication can affect your behaviour and place you and the people you work with at increased risk of injury through an accident.

Any medical condition or medication can make a person unsafe. To determine if your medical condition or the medication you are taking can affect your safety you should always:

- discuss it with a medical practitioner, eg your doctor
- discuss it with a pharmacist if you are buying over-the-counter medicine and not seeing a doctor
- read the labels on all drugs you may be taking to see what advice is provided.

The Health and Safety in Employment Act 1992 requires employees to take all practicable steps to not harm others. Reporting to and discussing with your employer that you are, or may be, affected by illness or medications is a practical step you can take to help prevent harm.

Advice for vessel owners, operators and masters

Employers can take the practical step of having a policy in place to encourage employees to report illnesses and medications that may affect safety. This is best achieved in a non-threatening way where an employee's privacy is protected.

When an employee reports that he or she is taking prescribed medication, enquire if there are any side effects that should be taken into account in the workplace. Employees may be concerned about maintaining their income. Employees will be more likely to report that they are a possible safety risk if they know there are continuing employment options available, such as moving into a low-risk role.

Advice for medical practitioners

Seafarers should be reminded of the risks associated with the use of prescribed medications. Where there may be a safety risk from using prescribed medication, medical practitioners should advise seafarers to discuss this with their employer.

Further information

For further information please contact our Wellington office:

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