My experiences as a cruise-ship nurse

From watching whales off the Mexican coast to dealing with on-board norovirus outbreaks, the life of a cruise-ship nurse is rarely dull. Here, Gary de Beer explains what it is like to be part of an on-board medical team, which might have access to state-of-the-art equipment, but can be many miles out to sea...

For the past eight years I have been working on a large cruise ship sailing out of the USA. I am a South African trained nurse and recently obtained my NMC registration after completing the overseas nursing programme (ONP). I’d like to share my story with you and provide some insight into the highs and lows of cruise-ship nursing.

ALL ABOARD

Many readers of the Journal of Community Nursing, may be familiar with the cruise industry — Southampton, for instance is an active UK port. However the US cruise ship market dwarfs the UK’s industry, with cruise ships sailing from over 14 cities most days of the week.

The numbers of people sailing on the average cruise ship can include up to 3,500 guests and 1,000 crew, although this can increase to 5,000 guests and 2,000 crew on larger liners.

Providing facilities, including medical and nursing treatment if necessary, for this amount of people does present certain challenges unique to being at sea. Once the ship has set sail and is out in the open ocean, whatever and whoever comes through the door has to be dealt with as there is simply nowhere else to go.

As a nurse on a cruise ship, you are the accident and emergency department and the intensive care unit rolled into one and there are no specialists to refer to.

Similarly, turning a huge cruise ship around is not always a viable option; even if someone does fall ill on board, the ship may be too far away from port to turn back. However, if there is a serious medical emergency, the vessel can increase its speed to reach the closest destination faster; or manoeuvre close enough to land to stage a helicopter evacuation.

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FACILITIES AND STAFF

Although it is true that as a nurse on a cruise ship you may be isolated, the medical facilities on board are designed to offer a range of treatments, for example managing ventilated patients or carrying out blood chemistry to diagnose acute myocardial infarction.

When it comes to surgical management, most ships have the ability to perform blood transfusions on board, with the donor either being a family member or a crew member who will have been screened for hepatitis B and HIV. On my current ship, there is also a small but well-equipped laboratory on board, allowing us to perform complete blood counts (CBCs) and other tests such as electrolyte levels, prothrombin time (PT), international normalised ratio (INR), troponin, and other cardiac markers.

All medical/nursing staff must carry a valid advanced cardiovascular life support (ACLS) certificate, with at least one physician on board being certified in paediatric advanced life support (PALS). Nurses must either be experienced in intensive care or accident and emergency nursing, with a minimum of three years’ postgraduation experience.

Nurses are trained to perform basic radiological procedures as trips and falls are a relatively common occurrence due to the movement at sea. Once an X-ray has been performed, a specialist report is obtained when the boat is next docked. My current ship also has a telemedicine capacity, with 24-hour specialist consultations with US academic hospitals available.

LIFE AT SEA

The ship’s company or crew will be on board for the duration of their 6–8 month contract and are considered to be a floating ‘community’. The cruise industry is very proud of the fact that they succeed in getting people from over 50 countries to work and live together. Being seafarers, staff are...
subject to random drug testing with a zero-tolerance policy for offenders.

Following US Coast Guard legislation, all crew members have to be in possession of a valid medical certificate before boarding. Similarly, on arrival the medical team perform wellness checks on the crew, which include a fasting blood sugar level test, blood pressure reading, proof of measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccination, and tuberculosis (TB) screening. Haemoglobin A1c (HbA1c) and lipid panel tests can also be performed on board.

We can also carry out Mantoux tests using a standard intradermal injection, with a reading taken 48 hours later. If the medical officer suspects a patient is infected with TB, a chest X-ray is performed.

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Outbreaks
Due to the enclosed nature of life aboard ship, outbreaks of conditions such as the ‘dreaded’ norovirus are inevitable, and can spread rapidly. Norovirus is often brought aboard by a passenger who then serves as the carrier, passing the virus onto others on-ship.

Because of this infection risk, the standard of hygiene on board is very high, with some ships regularly scoring 99–100% in unannounced inspections by public health authorities. In a further attempt to reduce outbreaks, an on-board log is kept of all gastrointestinal cases and an electronic report is sent to on-shore authorities before the ship re-enters the country from international waters. The press seem to enjoy publishing on-board outbreak stories, but then it is quite fun seeing your ship on CNN!

The medical team also become quite skilled at recognising patients with flu symptoms, as this is another a source of minor on-board outbreaks. A nasal swab is performed to confirm the diagnosis and the patient is then isolated in his or her cabin and prevented from using the public areas, which needless to say is rarely popular. Staff are also encouraged to have a free flu vaccination, although at this stage it is not mandatory.

HIGHLIGHTS
The past eight years in the job have been memorable for me and I feel I have learnt a lot and become a better nurse for it. Will I ever forget the thrill of being evacuated from the Cape Cod coast by helicopter and landing on the roof of Boston’s Massachusetts General Hospital in the middle of the night with a haemorrhaging patient? Probably not in a hurry.

I have also been fortunate to have travelled along Alaska’s Inside Passage, seen breaching whales around Cabo San Lucas off the Mexican coast, and witnessed the graceful beauty of stingrays while snorkelling off Grand Cayman.

On reflection, maybe I’ll go back for just one more contract...