

ZERO-TOLERANCE

HOW DRUGS AND CREW MEMBERS CAN BE A LETHAL COMBINATION

Recent incidents concerning superyacht crews and drug use has highlighted the dangers of not maintaining a rigid and stringent testing system, and a zero-tolerance policy for crew members who are found to have used drugs.

Words by Ed Hill



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When superyacht Captain Drew Gollan was shot dead in Antigua whilst skippering the 50 metre yacht Perseus, the news of his death spread through the yachting community like wildfire. Concerns over the safety and security of yachties in Antigua immediately sprang to mind, but later reports alleged that, at the time of his death, the superyacht captain was in possession of a quantity of drugs. In response to the incident, the president of the Antigua & Barbuda Marine Association stated that drugs were far too easily available for yacht crew on the islands and that if there wasn't such a strong demand, there would be no supply. To combat the situation, he urged for drugs testing to be a standard procedure for all yacht management companies and yacht crew employment agencies. Unfortunately, the association between the superyacht industry and drugs was once again dragged to the fore. While many may link the use of drugs with wild parties staged by owners and guests, drug abuse amongst crew shouldn't be ignored. Superyacht crews work extremely hard so when they do get some down time it's understandable that they'll want to let their hair down. How far they take it is another matter. After a long charter season, many yacht crews will have a strong yearning to go ashore and party. No one can blame them for that. However, their disposable income coupled with their desire to over-indulge has the potential to make them a perfect target for local drug dealers. Some may contend that whatever crew members get up to in their own time is no one else's business. However, when employed in a position of considerable responsibility

and trust, a crew member has to be accountable not only to themselves but also to their fellow shipmates on board. There can be no denying that to flirt with drugs is to flirt with danger, the outcome of which can end in tragedy and bring a lot of unwanted attention to the yacht. One such incident resulted in the tragic death of a female crew member. "The crew had just finished a charter, they had cash in hand and some time off and so they went on a bender,"

explained the yacht's manager, "the crew had been drinking and using cocaine and methamphetamines." They were allowed to stay out late and sleep in, but concerns were raised about one crew member when she failed to show up on deck by lunch. Unable to rouse her by knocking on the door, the Captain unlocked her cabin to find her dead in her bunk. An autopsy confirmed a fatal drug overdose. Concerns of drug use in the workplace have become more and more commonplace with an ever-increasing amount of companies introducing employee drugs screening programmes, particularly in organisations where safety is paramount. The maritime sector is no different and recent amendments (the so-called Manila Amendments) to the International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers (STCW) advise of the implementation of a clearly written policy to prevent drug and alcohol abuse.

Culture

The culture within the yachting industry differs especially when compared to other maritime sectors such as commercial shipping. Yacht crews are generally younger and few remain in the industry for their entire career. Yachting provides an opportunity for university graduates to travel before they embark on their chosen career. Consequently, a carefree attitude is adopted by many. The temptation for a crew member to partake in drugs use not only poses a risk to their own personal health, it also has a detrimental effect on their productivity and ability to concentrate. In turn, this increases the risk of accidents.



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None of this is breaking news, the negative impact of drugs misuse is well publicised, yet some elements of the yacht industry choose to turn a blind eye to the issue. A recent survey revealed a split within the industry regarding views on drugs testing. Of twenty captains questioned whether they conducted testing, fifty per cent did conduct drug tests and fifty per cent didn't. Those that didn't claimed that testing wasn't necessary as they insisted that

drug misuse wasn't a problem on their boat. This attitude is indicative of a myth within the industry that those yachts which introduce a drugs screening programme indicates that there is a problem.

Benefits of a Screening Programme

The yacht has both a moral and legal responsibility to provide a safe working environment. This includes selecting crew members that are fit and capable of carrying out their duties competently and safely. An individual who is or has been under the influence of drugs presents a significant safety hazard not only to themselves but also to the rest of the crew. All drugs, including alcohol and some prescribed drugs may have side effects that exacerbate the risk of accidents on board. Even in moderate doses, some drugs remain in the body and can affect the user for a number of days after the drug was taken.

Zero-tolerance policy

The effectiveness of a drug screening and testing programme solely depends upon its deterrent value. This means that it depends on whether the crew members believe that drug users will be detected or whether they believe that the programme can be beaten. For example, if crew members feel that once a ship has been tested, they are safe for six months, the programme's effectiveness is considerably weakened.

Therefore, introducing a strict zero-tolerance drugs policy will go a long way to maintaining a drug free yacht. This is beneficial to crew safety and the yacht's standing in the industry by:

- Reducing the risk and cost of accidents caused by impaired judgement
- Reducing the cost of absenteeism or poor work performance of the drug user
- Saving on the cost and inconvenience of recruiting and training replacement crew when drug abusers become unreliable
- Reducing the possibility of fines and vessel detention
- Improving crew morale
- Improving the yacht's reputation
- An effective drug policy has been proven to attract a higher quality of job applicant

Adopting a rigid stance on safety and implementing an onboard safety culture means that drug use and safety cannot be combined. It's a recognised fact that drug abuse can have serious consequences for the safety and well-being of the crew. Therefore, the application of a zero-tolerance towards drugs use coupled with a robust drug testing regime sends out a powerful message. Having a crew that is entirely clean from drugs is undoubtedly a positive step for everyone.

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