

4 ALBERT EMBANKMENT
LONDON SE1 7SR
Telephone: +44 (0)20 7735 7611 Fax: +44 (0)20 7587 3210

Circular Letter No.4204/Add.42
17 September 2021

To: All IMO Member States
United Nations and specialized agencies
Intergovernmental organizations
Non-governmental organizations in consultative status with IMO

Subject: **Coronavirus (COVID-19) – Joint IMO/ILO statement on upholding medical assistance obligations to seafarers and accelerating seafarer vaccination programmes**

1 The Secretary-General of IMO and the Director-General of ILO note with regret that almost 14 months after issuing the *Recommendations for port and coastal States on the prompt disembarkation of seafarers for medical care ashore during the COVID-19 pandemic* (Circular Letter No.4204/Add.23), seafarers are still struggling to access such care when needed. Advocacy from Member States, the maritime industry, social partners and seafarers themselves has once again brought the plight of seafarers to the fore.

2 As enshrined in ILO's 2006 Maritime Labour Convention (MLC 2006), it is incumbent upon Member States to ensure seafarers on board ships in their territory are given access to medical facilities ashore, should they require immediate medical care, including dental care.¹ The legal obligation to render assistance to seafarers in distress, including medical assistance, is also an intrinsic component of various IMO conventions.

3 Notwithstanding international agreements, there is also a moral obligation to ensure seafarers can access medical care ashore without delay, whenever they need it, and to extend medical assistance on board should the need arise by allowing qualified doctors and dentists to visit ships. It is also important that a medical assessment be conducted prior to administering any treatment, which could include telemedicine assessment provided by international health providers. Receiving such care can be a matter of life or death for seafarers who fall ill while working on ships. The international community should do its utmost to support those who have maintained the global supply chain under pandemic conditions over the last 18 months and keep carrying on, often despite enormous personal hardships.

4 As COVID-19 vaccination programmes continue to be implemented around the world, it is imperative that Governments do not forget the lifeblood of international trade, the seafarers. While they continue to ply their often-unsung trade, their importance has once again been brought into sharp focus as the global economy strives to shake off the effects of the pandemic. We once again urge Governments to recognize the strategic importance of the maritime sector and, in line with UN General Assembly resolution A/75/17 adopted

¹ See resolution concerning the implementation and practical application of the MLC, 2006 during the COVID-19 pandemic, adopted by the Special Tripartite Committee of the MLC, 2006 in April 2021.

on 1 December 2020, to designate seafarers as key workers² and to treat them as such by providing access to medical care. We would further urge governments to prioritize seafarers in their national COVID-19 vaccination programmes, in accordance with the *WHO SAGE Roadmap for Prioritizing uses of COVID-19 Vaccines in the Context of Limited Supplies*, as updated on 16 July 2021, and to offer WHO-approved Emergency Use Listing (EUL) vaccines to ensure their vaccination status is recognized internationally.³ We would also encourage Governments to recognize the role other marine personnel play in facilitating global trade and, wherever possible, to also vaccinate them on a priority basis.

5 Information received by IMO and ILO indicates that 24 countries have thus far answered the clarion call by implementing seafarer vaccination programmes, or signalling their intent to do so, in designated ports within their jurisdictions.⁴ We are extremely grateful to these countries but urge more to step forward to accelerate, in particular, the vaccination of seafarers serving international shipping. Government agencies, industry, labour and seafarer welfare groups continue to work assiduously to facilitate and/or deliver vaccines for seafarers. However, much remains to be done. We shall continue to work with our sister UN agencies, Governments and industry bodies to address the ongoing needs of seafarers and to safeguard their basic rights, so that they may continue to facilitate the global economy.

² See Circular Letter No.4204/Add.35/Rev.7 for the current list of IMO Member States having notified IMO that they have designated seafarers (and other marine personnel, as appropriate) as key workers.

³ The list of WHO-approved EUL vaccines is accessible at:
<https://extranet.who.int/pqweb/vaccines/covid-19-vaccines>

⁴ A list of these countries and their constituent ports is accessible at: <https://icma.as/vaccines/>