



Australian Government

**Seafarers Safety, Rehabilitation
and Compensation Authority**

**Seacare
Conference 2006**

**Conference Welcome
Geoff Gronow, Chairperson**

Sumac, Melbourne

Thursday, 26 October 2006

CONFERENCE WELCOME CHAIRPERSON – GEOFF GRONOW

Good morning Ladies and Gentleman, can I ask you to take your seats so that we can get the conference underway.

Firstly, it's my very great pleasure to welcome you all here to the third Seacare Conference and of course the Awards and Dinner this evening.

A couple of days ago we celebrated the 200th Anniversary of the Battle of Trafalgar and that was celebrated by the Navy with appropriate pomp and ceremony and glasses of port. Some of you will know that Nelson's ship is at Portsmouth. There are a group of tourists standing on the quarterdeck and a very spruce Royal Navy Petty Officer was standing there and pointing to a brass plaque on the deck. He said that's where Nelson fell, and some old lady standing in the back of the crowd said "Oh I don't wonder I nearly tripped over it myself".

This venue is not quite as historic as the quarterdeck of the Victory but we chose it because over the years it has seen a lot of shipping. A lot of freight and cargo have gone through this building and of course many many vessels were tied up here in the Yarra. As you know the bridges prevent vessels coming up here now but we thought that Sumac provided a very good venue for Seacare and for our conference and dinner tonight.

My name's Geoff Gronow, I'm the Chairperson of the Seacare Authority, and it's my pleasure to open the conference and I trust you'll find the conference rewarding in terms of information and in terms of meeting and greeting people and exchanging views. Many people have made a very special effort to bring this conference together. I want to introduce the Seacare Management Group and our supporters from Comcare with whom we work. Firstly our Manager, Phil Beaumont, most of you will know and our Deputy Manager, David Bonny who is hiding down the back there but we know him. We also welcome Steve Kibble from Comcare who's got responsibility for policy and research particularly in relation to Seacare, Martin Dolan who is Deputy CEO of Comcare but more importantly Deputy Chair of the Authority, he's with us today. And in particular Julie Loone and Bethany Giles who are assisting us with the running of the function. We're very grateful to you for coming down and helping us get the conference going.

Now this is our third Conference. The first Conference took place in Melbourne in 2003 at the Melbourne Conference Centre with a dinner at the Melbourne Aquarium. The second Conference was in November 2004 at Darling Harbour in Sydney. I know that many of you will have attended these conferences and this conference will build upon the work that we've done in the previous conferences.

Before I outline today's proceedings I just want to thank our sponsors, for without our sponsors we would not be able to put on the conference and the dinner in the way in which we've been able to do this year. We're very grateful to our sponsors, particularly for their support for the Seacare Authority and our aims and objects. We've had a banner made here listing our sponsors and I hope you'll note they've been very generous. Our Gold Sponsors are ASP Ship Management, P&O Maritime and Teekay Shipping. Our Silver Sponsors are Comcare, CSL Australia and Inco Ships. And our Bronze Sponsors are Allianz Australia Insurance, Australian Maritime Safety Authority, Australian Shipowners Association, Mermaid Marine, MP Safety Management and Sparke Helmore Lawyers. As I've said, we're very grateful to all of the sponsors who readily came forward to support us in putting on this program today and tonight. We're grateful of course for their commitment to the Australian maritime industry.

The theme of today's conference is ***"Improving Rehabilitation and Return to Work Outcomes"***. Over a period of time the Seacare Authority has identified the rehabilitation and return to work performance of the Seacare scheme to be an area which is requiring significant attention. That's not to say that we're separating rehabilitation from accident prevention, far from it. We are, however, highlighting rehabilitation and return to work for many reasons. We believe that these elements should be approached in an integrated manner. However, in determining the theme for the conference the Members of the Authority thought that it was important to closely examine rehabilitation and return to work because of the unique issues that this industry confronts in this area. Rehabilitation and return to work are important issues, not the least because of the potentially high risk and high injury nature of the work due to moving platform and so on. But also because of structural difficulties associated with return to work which presents unique challenges to Seafarers who sustain injury and of course to their employers. The 24 hour nature of the employment and the distance of vessels from land and the full range of medical assistance, exposure to the elements and the rigorous fitness requirements all combine to make injury prevention and return to seafaring a challenging issue for the industry. The Seacare Authority, of course, is mindful of this.

This is not the first time that the Seacare Authority has focused on rehabilitation and return to work. In 2000 and 2001 we ran a series of Symposiums and Round Table Discussions that resulted in the development of the Authority's Rehabilitation and Return to Work Guidelines. We produced some guidance materials and so on. However, we thought that it was timely to reappraise the guidance materials with a view to amending and enhancing it as is appropriate from the outcome of today's discussions. So you've all got an opportunity to contribute to the Authority's work in this way, and of course I ask for your contributions. We want to have an exchange of information, as I've said, and a sharing of information between companies, unions and so on, on this very important area.

Today's conference program will provide many opportunities for interacting, learning and exchanging information. I'm very much looking forward to hearing from the line up of speakers that Phil and the others at Seacare Management Group have been able to bring together for today and I'm intrigued by the prospects of the hypothetical which we will have after lunch, and the opportunities that the hypothetical will give us. I'm also looking forward to engaging in the Round Table Discussions where I expect a number of ideas and comments on effective return to work strategies will be put forward and we'll note the suggestions that have been made during the program today. So the conference program has been designed to be participative and I encourage all of you to freely express your views here today.

The Seacare Awards and Conference is of course our Premier Event. This being the case it provides an opportunity to address scheme stakeholders and to highlight the Authority's work. Therefore, I would like to broadly outline some of the Authority's recent initiatives and the achievements of the scheme over the last year. I might say that our Annual Report is being prepared and is in the hands of the Minister's Office but it hasn't been tabled yet. I know that you eagerly look forward to our Annual Report each year, it rises to the best seller list at our book store in Melbourne very quickly as you know! That report will be out and about and we will distribute it very soon.

In terms of our primary objectives it's highly gratifying that there have been no work related fatalities involving seafarers covered by this scheme for several years. Its 11 years since there was a workplace death in the maritime industry covered by the OHS(MI) Act and of course we will continue working hard to ensure that remains the case. It's also pleasing to be able to say the scheme is maintaining its positive performance across a range of key injury prevention and workers' compensation indicators. Importantly, Seacare remains on track to meet its National OH&S Strategy 2002-2012 targets, specifically concerning zero fatalities and the reduction in the incident of injuries, which of course is one of our prime functions. We should also note that today's conference, as well as the Seacare Awards Program, are being held at this time as part of the Safe Work Australia Week running from 22nd – 28th October. The National focus on Workplace Safety is supported by the Australian Government and all OH&S jurisdictions under the framework of the National OH&S Strategy, which aligns all State and Territory Safety Weeks. So the Seacare Awards and Conference form part of that program in support of Safe Work Australia Week.

The Seacare scheme's positive performance has also been demonstrated by some encouraging improvement in terms of rehabilitation and return to work programs for injured Seafarers and that will be discussed in detail later on today, and the rate of disputed claims has also declined. Premium rates for workers' compensation insurance in 2004-2005, that's the latest year for which we've got figures currently available, also fell.

The Seacare Authority continues to manage the Seafarers' Safety Net Fund to ensure that compensation benefits are available for injured seafarers even when there is no employer in place against which a claim can be lodged. The Authority has revised the target reserve level of the fund, having had appropriate actuarial advice and taking into the likelihood of future default events as well as current estimates and potential liabilities. We were able to recommend to Minister Andrews a reduction in the rate of levy payable by employers and this reduced levy came into effect on 1st April 2006. The Authority was pleased to be able to make this recommendation to the Minister and to get the reduced levy in place.

Also following the approval of the Minister, the Seacare Authority introduced a new Permanent Impairment Guide on 1st March 2006. The new Seacare Guide modernises the processes for assessing permanent impairment and keeps the jurisdictions in line with other Australian workers' compensation schemes, and of course aligns very closely to the Comcare Guide which brings uniformity to the whole process.

The Seacare Authority continues its work to progressively adopt National OH&S standards to the extent that they're applicable to this industry and its particular conditions. Last month the Minister approved the Code of Practice for Manual Handling in the maritime industry under the OHS(MI) Act and complementary regulations are also proposed. Substantial work has been done on confined space regulations and code by the Authority with a view to commencing industry consultations shortly.

In 2005-2006, the Seacare Authority determined that we had just short of 5,000 seafarers covered by the Seafarers Act working for some 30 employers on 182 ships. The Seacare Scheme is alive and well and supported by seafarers and employers. The Seacare scheme is Australia's only national industry based OH&S workers' compensation scheme. However the scheme is also a range of working relationships between seafarers and employers, ship operators, insurers, seafarer's representatives and unions, industry associations, rehabilitation providers, trainers, legal representatives, as well as government agencies and authorities, and it's very pleasing for the Authority to see so many members here today representing these various groups that I've just referred to, and this just reaffirms to me the Seacare scheme continues to be robust and effective.

Before I formally open the conference, I'd like to draw your attention to the Conference Satchel which is in your possession, in which you'll find the program for today. You'll note that we intend to break for morning tea about 11.15am and for lunch at 12.30pm and we then plan to have an afternoon break at about 3.00pm with the conference closing at 4.30pm to give you time to do whatever's necessary for the dinner, which will be here in this venue at 7.00pm tonight. In the Satchel you'll find various documents relating to the Seacare Authority's Best Practice Guide to Rehabilitation and Return to Work, and this document will be looked at during the afternoon sessions.

You'll also find an outline for the Round Table Discussion which will take place this afternoon. We've included a copy of the Return to Work Monitor for the Seacare jurisdiction, which provides useful benchmarking and comparative performance information with national data. There's also a range of general information from Seacare and from Comcare. There's information and other items which our sponsors have been good enough to place in the bag. You'll see that the Authority has taken a new initiative; we've actually got a Seacare Cap, which we expect you will all wear with pride as you take our message of injury prevention and rehabilitation and return to work to the industry. You'll see an evaluation form as well which I would ask that you complete. It's very important for us to know just what you think of the conference and the awards and the dinner to give us (using a terrible word) feedback so that we'll be able to plan future events.

We'd be grateful for, as I said, any feedback that you can give us.

I should also say that Minister Andrews apologises for not being able to be present this morning to open the Conference. He has other pressing engagements which keep him away from Melbourne this morning, and unfortunately for the dinner tonight, but we have discussed with him the conference and the dinner and I've kept him informed as to what we're planning and what we will do. The amenities in this building are at either end of the building and you go up a short flight of stairs and then of course there's the lovely area out there for those who need fresh air. If there are any matters which the Authority or the Seacare Management Group can help you with today then you know who we are and where we are, Please make yourself known and we'll do whatever we can do to help.

I now declare the Conference open and I wish you all a very productive and successful conference and meeting.