

Submission to Academia Letters

Covid Pandemic impacted on Cruise ship Doctors availability in Italy. A proposed solution to deal with it.

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Preface

The Coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic is a global public health emergency that Dropped Physician Recruitment by 30% in the US (Terry, 2020).

The available data show that the pandemic resulted in a significant staff shortage in hospitals, as 18% of health care workers have quit their jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic, while another 12% have been laid off. Among health care workers who have kept their jobs during the pandemic, 31% have considered leaving (Galvin, 2021).

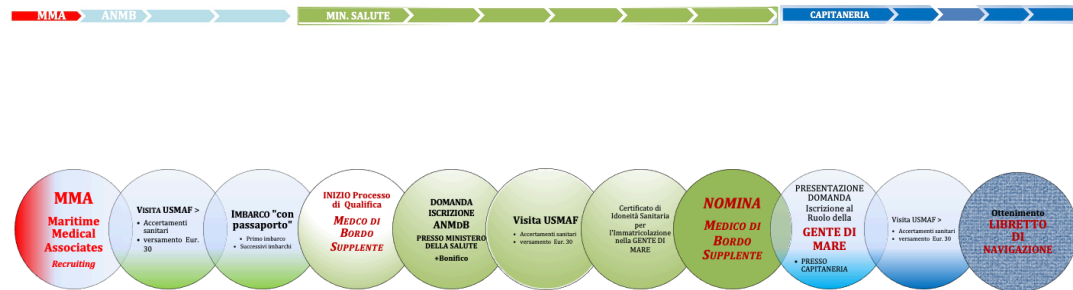
In March 2020 the Italian government established the Special Continuity Care Units (USCA) (Lippi, 2021) to perform mass vaccinations at special hubs.

The opportunity to enlist Doctors willing to embark on the role of ship doctors in Italy is historically limited due to the complex, expensive, and time consuming procedures imposed by the never updated Royal Decree of 1897

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(Consiglio dei Ministri, 1895) to access this activity.



Synopsis outlining the procedural process to obtain the SSWB, which could take up to five years to complete.

On the other hand, in Italy the presence of the Ship Doctor on board of RoPAX ships that embark more than 500 passengers or if that remain at sea for more than 6 hours, is mandatory by Law (Assarmatori, Confitarma, 2021).

This means that Cruise Ferries Italian flagged that do not have a doctor on board cannot leave the berth to sail, it does not matter if they have passengers or goods on board. Therefore, the shortage of available Doctors on board is an extremely pressing problem by putting into crisis the connections between the continent, the major islands and the numerous smaller islands (Assarmatori, Confitarma, 2021).

The Shipowners' Associations published an open letter addressed to the Minister of Health Hon. Stefano Speranza highlighting the risk that, in the height of the summer season, a real social emergency could explode with thousands of citizens blocked on the docks and unable to move to and from the islands, and therefore de facto deprived of the constitutional right to territorial continuity. The Shipowners Associations open letter solicits an urgent solution to the problem of the lack of doctors available to embark on Italian-flagged ships (Assarmatori, Confitarma, 2021).

To cope with the shortage of personnel, the Servizio Sanitario Nazionale (SSN) has greatly simplified and speeded up the procedures for hiring Vaccinators with temporary contracts just graduated and non-specialist doctors have been enrolled in Hospital Emergency Departments too (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, 2020).

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Simplification of bureaucracy was endorsed by the Government, which allowed Ship Doctors serving embarked “with passport” under a contract as “Health Technicians” with Medical Director function. The “Qualified On-board Doctors” and “Substitute Doctors” in possession of the “Seaman Service Book” (SSB) have priority at boarding.

Boarding is managed by the “National Association of Doctors on Board Merchant Navy” (ANMB), playing a role related to trade unions.

In August 2021, in the midst of the passengers’ maritime transport crisis due to the shortage of Ship Doctors during season of maximum tourist traffic through the Mediterranean, inter alia to and from islands, a group of retired doctors with long hospital careers in various medical specialties and with experience in first aid, have obtained the affiliation to the ANMB and gathered to respond to the appeals of Shipping Companies.

A Professional Association has been established in August 2021, named *Maritime Medical Associates* (MMA), to deal with poor Cruise ship Doctors availability in Italy.

Methods

The recruitment methods were analyzed, and corrections were developed.

In Italy, recruitment of Ship Doctors is mainly based on passive Candidates that:

1. They are mostly currently employed.
2. They’re not actively looking for work.
3. They may not be available immediately.
4. They don’t usually apply organically.

Applicant seeking for information shall search for information on the

1. Website of the ANMB <https://www.medibordo.it/homepage.php>
 - (a) Candidates take awareness of the extreme complexity of the bureaucratic procedures to be carried out.

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- (b) Applicants become dissuaded from proceeding further.
- 2. Shipping Companies Calls published on Shipping sector magazines
 - (a) Doctors usually do not read Shipping Sector Magazines.

Discussion

It immediately became clear to us that the recruitment of ship's doctors is based on the spontaneous adhesion of passive candidates being deterred by extreme bureaucracy.

Candidates are not reached by the vacancies with sufficient effectiveness. The widespread shortage of doctors in the Public Health Service caused by the ongoing pandemic greatly reduces the pool of possible passive candidates willing to work as Ship Doctors.

The system of recruiting passive medical candidates is deficient in itself, and worked even worse in the context of the ongoing pandemic.

MMA reviewed Current Ship Doctors Hiring Strategies and a solution to deal with poor Cruise ship Doctors availability in Italy has been devised.

On August 2021 MMA implemented an active recruiting policy based on modern social media by publishing attractive calls on LinkedIn and Facebook, and making a page accessible on Facebook.

A call center was also made available where MMA doctors received the phone calls.

Also, a widespread word of mouth among colleagues was also put in place.

In the time lapse of a few weeks, numerous telephone applications were received.

The candidates were interviewed during the same phone call and were asked to submit their CV.

Retired candidates with extensive public hospital service experience and first aid experience were selected.

In the space of a few weeks, MMA has procured a ship's Doctors' service guaranteed from August to December 2021 on one ship.

In January 2022 a gentlemen's agreement was drawn up between MMA and a leading Italian shipping company for the provision of medical services on board for one cruise ferry of one shipping company, being guaranteed for the whole of 2022.

The ongoing Covid pandemic has produced disastrous effects on society, but at the same time it has stimulated the development of human resources that were previously reclining.

Further experience is needed to implement Ship Doctors active recruitment policy which is likely to improve the results of the Italian naval medical recruitment policy.

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