



## Your Medical Rights and Care

A fisherman is also a seaman, and a competent deepwater fisherman is as good a seaman as may be found anywhere. As a seaman, the fisherman has a right to free medical care in case of illness or injury. "Under a rule as old (as the maritime law itself) a seaman injured or sick while under articles is entitled to receive from the shipowner maintenance and cure: food, lodging and care."<sup>1</sup>

Medically, the responsibility of the shipowner was long ago eased by the federal government, and the seaman was therefore entitled to free medical care, including hospitalization, in a Public Health Hospital (the Marine Hospital), or equivalent. He is also entitled to "maintenance," a given sum of money per day, until his physi-

cian declares him cured and fit for duty.

If and when you need medical help, you must first of all see your skipper, because the skipper or his representative must sign a document attesting that you are indeed employed on board a fishing vessel.

On longline vessels that belong to the Fishing Vessel Owners' Association, and sail under an agreement with the Deep Sea Fishermen's Union, you are entitled to your full share of the trip on which you become ill or suffer an injury, regardless of whether you become unfit for work in the early part of the trip or near its end.

In any case, it is the duty of the skipper and of the delegate, if you have one on board, to inform a sick or injured fisherman of his rights and to see that he gets what he is entitled to, including proper medical attention.

While on the subject of medical

care, let's mention some things you can do to keep doctor and hospital away. When at sea, take extra good care of your health. You are not a "sissy" if you do. You are pretty much of a fool if you don't. Pay special attention to the care of your hands. Keep your hands clean, don't let slime and gurry dry on your hands, because that will dry out your skin and cause cracks to develop. After washing your hands at the end of a long workday, use a good hand lotion or salve, working it well into the skin. A large tube of Johnson & Johnson Antiseptic First Aid Cream<sup>2</sup> or a bottle of rubbing alcohol should be part of a standard outfit for a deep-water fisherman.

Beware of fish wounds! There are no really poisonous fishes off the coasts of the Pacific Northwest, but fishes such as the stingray (California) and the ratfish (in all Northwest waters) can be bad enough. A wound inflicted by the spines from either of these may bring you a powerful case of blood poisoning, if not promptly and properly treated.

The ratfish carries a "dagger" as part of its dorsal fin. If stuck by that one in your foot or in your hand, get into the galley as fast as possible, fill a bucket with hot water, add a liberal amount of Clorox, Purex, or a drawing agent like epsom salts and soak your limb in the solution. Keep the water as hot as you can take it and keep soaking for at least 2 hours. Punctures from sculpin, spiny dogfish, or from any one of twenty-odd rockfishes found in our waters may also be dangerous and should be treated as described. Do not neglect a small puncture of your hide. Remember, most infections originate in a small, insignificant scratch or sore. Even the old-timers forget this at times.

The gnarled, calloused, knobby hands of an old fisherman are painfully acquired, but today such a mark of a vocation is no longer necessary

<sup>1</sup> "Federal Responsibilities for Medical Care of Seamen" by C. J. Simpson, Director, National Labor Bureau, San Francisco, 1955. Trade Printery, Seattle.

<sup>2</sup> Mention of trade names does not imply endorsement of commercial products by the National Marine Fisheries Service, NOAA, or the authors.

or desirable. Hands do acquire callouses from sliding gear through them. They get knobby and arthritic from long exposure to salt water, but this is no longer such a vocational affliction.

After several days of working with cloth gloves only, hands wet from salt water, fish slime, and blood, the fisherman awakes to another day with hands that are stiff and puffed up, painful to move, and any small cuts gape open as the skin is pulled taut from increased muscle tone caused by water saturation and swollen muscles. Buttoning the pants and the shirt is a slow painful process. The quickest relief is to put on those soaking wet gloves so the skin takes up water and softens again, and squeezing and working the hands will, within 20-30 minutes, make them pliable and painless to work with.

About 1951, a fisherman experimented with a thin rubber, surgical-type glove to be worn inside the cloth working glove. Yes, the hands still get wet but principally from natural skin moisture. But in the morning, the hands are not stiff and sore. Remarkably enough, small cuts now will heal while working on the fishing grounds. In the old days cuts on the hand started on the cloth gloves, and what started as a small skin cut, would, in 4 or 5 days of fishing, grow to an open sore, skin worn away at the edges. Bandages would not stay in place.

The rubber surgical-type gloves should not fit so tightly as to impede circulation in the fingers. They should be snug so that gear can be handled without the hands sliding about in the gloves when wet and so that the sense of touch is not dulled by folds of rubber. Some fishermen prefer long gauntlets on the gloves that will cover their wrists and keep them dry.

Two pair of rubber gloves will do the work of three pair, since a left-hand glove can be turned inside out and become a right-hand glove, and vice versa. Even a glove with a torn finger will protect the hand, and can be used if you have no spares. You

will note, though, that the finger in that torn part of the glove will have some soreness from saltwater exposure. Take care of the rubber gloves by washing them clean inside and out at the end of the work day. Turn them inside out by rolling the gauntlet over the fingers and blowing up the glove like a balloon, with a sharp puff. When you awake in the morning, the outside will be dry. Reverse them again. They will slide on more easily if they are dusted lightly inside with talcum powder. Even corn meal and ordinary flour will do the job, though it looks like pancake dough when you remove the gloves at the end of the day.

Good care of your hands is important to both you and your shipmates because if you are crippled the extra work falls on your shipmates and this can slow the fishing and force the crew to work longer hours. You are issued only one pair of hands. They are your livelihood. Watch the old-timer who, at the end of the day, inspects his hands for unsuspected cuts. He carefully washes his hands, his wrists, and arms. Blood and slime can clog pores, create rash and pimples that turn into sores and become infected. From past experience, almost 50 percent of the first-trippers have hand problems caused by neglect, as a result of their hurry to get to the bunk for those few short hours of sleep. (Being so short, it's more like a nap, or a "kink" as some old-timers express it.)

Some men anoint their hands with lotion or salve, and all treat their little cuts with tincture of Merthiolate, rubbing alcohol, or other good disinfectant. A few Band-Aids in your kit will also be useful. Penicillin tablets are by prescription only, but keep in mind that they are not to be used as a preventative, ever. Use them at the intervals prescribed only *after* you get an infection, and know whether you are allergic to penicillin.

When washing wrists or cloth gloves, rinse well to get the worst of the blood and slime out. As a finishing

touch, many old-timers wring out lightly, then toss them on deck and stamp hard with the heel of the boot, repeating this several times to force out all bacteria-laden slime and blood. Stamp on the end of the glove fingers first, though: glove fingers will pop like a balloon if the water within is forced toward the fingers with the first stamp. Repeat the process until the water wrung out is clean.

Not much can be added about foot care that has not already been said of the hands. Ill-fitting boots or socks that cause a slight discomfort initially may, by the end of several days, cause chafes and sores that are crippling. Few fishermen wear wool socks only next to the skin because of the fiber coarseness. As a result, many wear fine-knit cotton socks, inside the wool socks, or sheepskin liners. The socks should be long and drawn up over the pants leg, even pinned if necessary. Loose fitting boots, feet sliding about within, can cause socks to pull down and end up as a ball in the toe of the boot. Foot perspiration and lack of circulation will make the boot wet inside, and this is particularly true if long hours are spent in the ice, putting away fish. The cold of the ice causes an increase of condensation within the boot.

Some boots are insulated, some have built up insteps. They are all expensive, and you don't save anything on the cheap ones. They, along with other special fishing gear, are tax deductible though. Save your store bills to document your income tax returns.

No one objects to a man leaving the deck to take care of himself if he gets a knife cut, or a gaff hook punched in his leg, or a fish bone in his wrist. The slime and blood and the rust are rich in bacteria and a few minutes of doctoring can save much pain and lost time later. If you do have an accident, let your skipper know since the consequences have to be shared by all. This is especially true if the cause is from a broken or deficient piece of equipment on deck.