



## Sailors the only patients at unique Vancouver clinic

Heather Kent

The sight of freighters sliding in and out of Vancouver's harbour is routine for Dr. Stan Karon, but there's nothing routine about his Mariners Clinic. It is the only private medical practice in this port city that is solely dedicated to treating foreign sailors aboard freighters and cruise ships. In a given day he could be called to handle anything from a routine checkup to broken bones to stocking a ship's medicine cabinet.

Today, Karon is seeing a new type of problem. The "Asian flu" that decimated Far East economies has combined with an economic slump in the shipping industry to create a new and growing problem for Karon — ship owners who simply abandon their vessels and crews. It has happened 7 times in the past year.

And because freighter crews account for half of Karon's business, once these ships are cast adrift by their owners he is left with a slew of bad debts for the care he has already provided.

The abandoned vessels are eventually sold by the federal government, but after the crews and a ship's mortgagee have been paid from the proceeds, Karon usually joins a long line of other creditors. It's often not worth pursuing the unpaid debts in court, he says.

Normally, sailors are covered by health insurance and local shipping agents arrange for their medical care. A union and the Missions to Seamen charity also play important roles, but Karon says the ethics of both agents and freighter captains varies widely. "Some captains are princes and others are tyrants," he says.

In one case, a sailor fractured his pelvis and spine while the ship was in harbour. The captain didn't want to pay for a water-taxi "house" call costing about \$300, so he waited until the freighter docked 3 days later. A Coast Guard inspector discovered the patient unsuccessfully trying to make his way down the gangway and called an ambulance.

The ship was impounded, and Karon was called in to stock it with medical supplies. When he arrived, the first aid room had nothing. After \$2000 worth of medical equipment and supplies had been loaded, the ship sailed.

At least every 6 months, says Karon, a crew member dies in harbour because of unsafe equipment. In a recent accident, an untested life raft with 6 sailors in it smashed into the hull during a drill after crucial attachments snapped, spilling all 6 men into the water. None was wearing a life jacket, and 1 of the men died.

"Everything is done on an urgent basis because ships don't like delays," explains Karon. It costs about \$10 000 a day for a freighter to be tied up at dockside, and tides are



Dr. Stan Karon: office visits last at least 45 minutes

also an important factor for ships passing under Vancouver's bridges on their way out to sea.

To accommodate ships' schedules, the Mariners Clinic is open 7 days a week. Karon works 6 days a week, with colleagues filling in on his day off. He relies heavily on 3 support staff and specialists, who will often see patients early in the morning or on evenings and weekends. All test results are faxed or emailed to the ships.

The patient load varies considerably, with no patients on some days and a dozen on others. The care is "very service oriented and labour intensive," he says, with office visits taking at least 45 minutes.

Karon charges the rates recommended by the British Columbia Medical Association — about double the rate provided by provincial medicare fees. As well, he often does *pro bono* work for Missions to Seamen, an organization he regards highly.

Karon says visiting sailors trust Canada's health care system and they tend to "save up their problems" for their visits here. Because freighters often have crew members from many different nationalities aboard, he has to bring interpreters into his office for some patients. Occasionally, crew members see Karon with compelling social reasons for why they must be sent home; he then calls the captains, who cooperate "90% of the time."

On cruise ships, the on-board physician looks after health problems, but Karon is employed to arranged specialist appointments or to provide a second opinion. Cruise ships are only in port for 1 day, so he must work quickly.

Karon enjoys his work and the change from his previous family practice. "It's satisfying to be able to cut through waiting time and give first-class service."

Heather Kent is a Vancouver journalist.