

Mental Health and Wellbeing at Sea Strategy

“Their Lordships require that all persons so employ'd do on all occasions conduct themselves peacably, quietly, and civilly to each other, each readily assisting the other in his respective department, to the utmost of his ability, in such a manner as will best promote the success of the public service in which they are jointly engag'd, and unite their individual endeavour into one general result”

Instructions to the scientists of the Investigator, drawn up by Sir Joseph Banks, for Matthew Flinders' voyage of 1801 – 1803



1. Background

1.1 Marine National Facility (MNF)

Funded by the Australian Government since 1984, owned and operated by CSIRO under direction of an independent Steering Committee, the Marine National Facility (MNF) provides a keystone element of the nation's research infrastructure by providing the only blue-water research capability available to Australian marine researchers and their international collaborators for work in Australia's vast marine estate. Access is provided through an independent and peer reviewed applications process focused on scientific and/or technical excellence, the potential to contribute to Australia's national benefit and the ability of the research team. This ensures research undertaken through the MNF is specifically selected for excellence and contribution to Australia's national benefit, and provides key information to government, industry and other stakeholders to support evidence-based decision-making focused on research challenges in fisheries management, geological resources, regional and global climate, coastal and offshore developments and marine operations.

The MNF comprises of a multi-purpose marine research vessel, a suite of unique scientific equipment providing over 30 years of marine data and a team of skilled people. Previously the MNF's blue water research capability has been delivered by the 66m *Southern Surveyor*. In 2014, the MNF marked the delivery of new purpose-built 94m multi-purpose research vessel RV *Investigator*, providing a step change in Australian marine and atmospheric research capability that will also act as a catalyst for international collaboration. With greatly increased capacity compared to *Southern Surveyor*, *Investigator* can undertake voyages from the tropics to the Antarctic ice edge, carry up to 40 scientists on voyages up to 60 days in duration. *Investigator* also hosts an extensive suite of state of the art scientific research equipment which has dramatically increased the ability of the MNF to address key national and international research challenges, many of which have impact far beyond our oceans.

1.2 Mental Health at Sea

CSIRO's policies strive beyond zero harm towards a healthy and safe working environment including on board *Investigator* which is a CSIRO workplace. The MNF recognises a healthy working environment is one with not only an absence of harmful conditions, but also with an abundance of health promoting conditions. To achieve this, the MNF is collaborating with CSIRO's Employee Assistance Program (EAP) and the medical services provided by Aspen Medical to deliver a healthy working environment on all MNF voyages.

CSIRO has engaged Converge International as their EAP provider. Converge International also offers ship specific confidential counselling, coaching and support for workplace and personal issues at sea.

Aspen Medical has been contracted to provide a range of medical services on board *Investigator*. On voyages operating in remote areas, a specialised medical practitioner (doctor) will accompany the voyage providing medical services including the management of *Investigator's* medical facility equipped with a surgical suite and 24/7 video linked telemedicine capability.

Together with this support, the MNF is proactively tackling the challenges associated with mental health and wellbeing at sea and will seek to cultivate an environment on board *Investigator* that delivers a positive and productive working environment.

1.3 Purpose and scope of this strategy

With the step change in sea going capabilities brought by *Investigator*, the MNF has identified additional risks to mental health and wellbeing of voyage participants associated with increased isolation, fatigue, anxiety and work pressures on voyages of varying lengths and operational areas throughout Australia's vast marine estate.

Building on existing CSIRO policies, this strategy aims to positively manage mental health and wellbeing at sea. The strategy primarily targets scientific voyage participants, who typically include project specific scientific and technical personnel from a range of Australian or international research organisations, as well as CSIRO technical staff who support MNF scientific equipment and data on *Investigator*. This strategy also targets the families and friends of scientific voyage participants, as they play a key role with the voyage participant before, during and after the voyage.

Other than scientific voyage participants, the professional marine crew that operate and maintain *Investigator* are also part of the larger voyage team and contribute significantly to the working environment on board. Marine crew are provided to *Investigator* under the ASP Ship Management Contract and are covered through this contract by ASP's policies and programs, including those in support of mental health and wellbeing, which complement the MNF approach. Marine crew are therefore not specifically in the scope of this strategy.

2. Roles and responsibilities for MNF Voyages

The MNF has contracted ASP Ship Management to operate and maintain *Investigator*. The Master and marine crew are employed by ASP and are responsible for the safety of the vessel and all those on board.

The Master, Voyage Manager and Chief Scientist form the senior management team on board *Investigator*. The **Master** has overall authority for the vessel including the safety of the vessel and all on board. The crew act on behalf of the Master. Under the Master, the **Voyage Manager** is CSIRO's on board representative and manages the MNF support staff. Their knowledge of vessel operations will help the Chief Scientist and the scientific teams carry out an effective and efficient research program. Under the Voyage Manager, the **Chief Scientist** manages the science program and science party for each voyage.

On a large research vessel such as *Investigator*, there are often multiple science teams on a voyage and the Chief Scientist will be supported by **Lead Principal Investigators** who are responsible for these teams. The Chief Scientist and Lead Principal Investigators are responsible for supervising their staff in port during mobilisation, on the voyage, in away ports and during demobilisation. The Chief Scientist and Lead Principal Investigators form the science management team for the voyage.

For each voyage on *Investigator*, the MNF will appoint an onshore **Voyage Operations Manager**. As a member of the MNF Operations Group, the Voyage Operations Manager will be the main shore-based contact person for the voyage. The Voyage Operations Manager is responsible for planning and preparations for the voyage, including working with the Chief Scientist and ASP to develop the voyage plan. This includes all voyage related activities during mobilisation, on voyage, demobilisation and post-voyage periods. The Voyage Operations Manager will also be the primary contact person on shore for the Voyage Manager.

These are the key roles involved in the safe planning, implementation and support of each voyage on board *Investigator*.

3. MNF Mental Health and Wellbeing at Sea Strategy

The MNF acknowledges that successful voyages on *Investigator* depend on the happiness and wellbeing of the voyage participants. Strategic actions to maintain positive mental health and wellbeing are therefore outlined across the following three stages:

- pre-voyage planning and preparation;
- on board *Investigator* at sea; and
- post-voyage transition back to family, colleagues and friends.

3.1 Pre-voyage

The decision to commit to a voyage should not be taken lightly and it is essential that voyage participants are thoroughly prepared for their time at sea.

Four weeks prior to an *Investigator* voyage, participants formally commit to their voyage by completing and returning mandatory pre-voyage documentation to the MNF Voyage Operations Manager. This provides vital safety information including a medical assessment, medical declaration, emergency contact details and a behavioural commitment to the voyage. This is also the time to provide the MNF Voyage Operations Manager with any special requirements which can be accommodated at sea to enhance the voyage experience.

During this pre-voyage period, the participant's focus will be on their research program and the scientific objectives of the voyage. However, *Investigator* is a dynamic research platform exposed to rapidly changing conditions at sea. Motion sickness and fatigue can quickly amplify anxiety associated with separation from family and friends for extended periods. Working away from loved ones can be problematic and there are a number of relationship and domestic matters that will require careful consideration.

As part of pre-voyage preparations, separation issues should be addressed through frank and open discussion with loved ones. The sensitive topic of leaving terminally ill or aged family and friends behind should also be addressed (see Box 1). The MNF online Health and Wellbeing at Sea eLearning Module, which must be completed well before departure, reiterates these important aspects. The Module has been designed in two parts, one for the voyage participant and one for their nominated on shore personal contact (partner, family member or friend).

Box 1

PhD candidate John is preparing to join *Investigator* for the first time and has previously spent short periods at sea on small research boats in Sydney Harbour. He is excited but also a little anxious about his upcoming 60 day voyage deep into the Southern Ocean where communication with loved ones will be limited.

He has spoken to his wife about his time away from their home and three young children and they have discussed the added pressure, stress and heartache his absence will create for his family.

His parents are happy to see him go to sea chasing his dreams but are concerned that his terminally ill grandfather may not be alive when he returns. John has decided to openly discuss this possibility with his grandfather in the presence of his wife and parents. He explains that the voyage is unable to return to port due to family emergencies and it is not possible for participants to be transferred ashore from remote locations.

John's immediate family are very supportive of his chosen career and along with John are now better prepared emotionally for his time away from them.

During this pre-voyage period, participants are able to discuss the voyage with the Chief Scientist and MNF Voyage Operations Manager and ask questions. This should include any concerns participants have relating to any aspect of the voyage, and provides opportunities for participants to make the Voyage Operations Manager aware of any religious or cultural requirements they may have while on board *Investigator*.

Voyage participants will receive the MNF Health and Wellbeing Strategy as well as important contact details for family left behind to communicate with *Investigator* at sea and to access EAP counselling. The eLearning Module also provides contact details for MNF on shore support available to the family of voyage participants. These preparations set the scene for all participants and their families to proactively commit to mental health and wellbeing at sea for the duration of the voyage and the various ways to seek assistance as required.

3.2 On board *Investigator*

Voyage Briefing

At the outset of each voyage the Voyage Manager conducts a mandatory briefing on board *Investigator* for all scientific voyage participants. This briefing includes a refresher of the MNF Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy. On a remote voyage, the ship's doctor introduces the participants to the comprehensive medical services available from Aspen Medical, including mental health and wellbeing programs.

At this time the ship's communications systems are explained to facilitate effective contact opportunities between participants and their family and friends ashore. Participants are introduced to Beyond Blue reference information located in the ship's library, a quiet space to read and seek personal counselling if required. Contact details for the EAP provider are reiterated and the EAP ship specific confidential counselling and support services are explained.

During the briefing the Voyage Manager encourages participants to be aware of and care for their shipmates at sea. Participants are empowered to act if they observe any possible deterioration of a shipmate's mental health and wellbeing. They are directed to contact the Chief Scientist, the ship's doctor or Voyage Manager if they, or any of their shipmates, appear to be suffering from any form of anxiety or depression during the voyage. Individuals understand the structures on board the ship to care for health and wellbeing and feel responsible for looking out for not only their own mental health and wellbeing but also that of their shipmates.

Scientific voyage participants are also briefed on the MNF emergency procedures in place on *Investigator*. This information is provided as part of the overall on board emergency procedures which are further explained during the compulsory ASP ship induction and emergency muster drill which are conducted separately. Participants are reminded of the importance of controlled communications during an emergency and that the extent of control will depend on the nature of the emergency. These measures are required to avoid confusion, to keep communication channels clear for those on board dealing directly with the emergency, for security purposes and/or to provide time to notify families and organisations on land before the emergency is made public. Control of communications on the vessel in an emergency will be at the discretion of the Master, supported by the Voyage Manager and Chief Scientist.

During Voyage

Throughout the voyage, the MNF Voyage Manager encourages positive and healthy interaction amongst scientific participants and marine crew. This may include weekly games and movie nights, science and photography presentations, footy tipping and pedometer stepping competitions.

In addition, the Voyage Manager and Chief Scientist conduct daily science meetings. These daily meetings, conducted in the ship's main lounge for all personnel, also provide an opportunity for the Voyage Manager and Chief Scientist to monitor health and wellbeing and address any potential issues.

On a remote voyage, the ship's doctor meets with the Voyage Manager weekly to discuss the Voyage Manager's mental health and wellbeing and any potential issues amongst the voyage participants.

Any health and wellbeing incidents that arise during the voyage will be confidentially discussed by the Voyage Manager and Master, who is responsible for the safety of all on board. On a remote voyage, the ship's doctor will be consulted. Depending on the severity, the senior management team will take appropriate action in consultation with on shore support in alignment with CSIRO's HSE Strategy and MNF Emergency Response Plan for *Investigator*. On a remote voyage, should the participant not feel comfortable discussing their concerns with the Chief Scientist or Voyage Manager, they may approach the doctor directly for a private and confidential discussion (see Box 2). Otherwise, confidential advice is available through the EAP service.

Box 2

Newly graduated marine researcher Emma is three days into her first remote voyage on *Investigator* and has been experiencing ongoing nausea and vomiting due to seasickness. She is becoming isolated from her colleagues and feels embarrassed to be unable to perform duties while her scientific group continues with their important research program.

Emma's isolation quietly grows into anxiety and depression as she feels guilty at not being able to contribute. She becomes irritable, easily upset, fatigued and teary and is finding effective communications with family and friends on shore difficult. Her symptoms intensify due to her continued seasickness until, on the combined advice of the Chief Scientist and Voyage Manager, she arranges an appointment with the ship's doctor for a private and confidential consultation.

The doctor is able to provide comfort and support to Emma and treat her symptoms on board in a professional and effective manner. Emma is happy to be cared for and responds well to treatment.

3.3 Post voyage

The transition back into domestic and professional life following a voyage can be a difficult one. Being away from loved ones and close colleagues for extended periods can be difficult and participants may have enjoyed or endured experiences at sea which they find difficult to relate with family and friends left behind. During an extended absence, participants may have developed high expectations around their return home and become disappointed or depressed with the reality of life back on shore. Families and partners left back home will be looking for assistance with the many issues of modern life, which can feel overwhelming for a voyage participant after a long absence in the relatively isolated social environment on *Investigator*. This is commonly known as "post-cruise blues" among experienced seagoing personnel.

To assist through this transitional process, voyage participants can reference the information made available through the eLearning module. If required, the EAP provider is available to provide professional support and counselling to assist participant's transition safely back into domestic and professional life.

At the end of every voyage, the Voyage Manager and/or Chief Scientist continue to monitor participants to ensure ongoing mental health and wellbeing support is provided as required (see Box 3).

Box 3

Mark is an experienced marine scientist having happily completed several long research voyages in the past. He has just returned home from a voyage on *Investigator* where he experienced heightened levels of separation sadness and anxiety which he believes were due to the voyage being his first extended time away from his wife and their new baby son.

Back with his family, he feels reluctant to leave his home environment and has become overly protective of his wife and baby boy. Post-voyage research work commitments and data processing are falling behind schedule and he cannot motivate himself to leave home.

He discusses his feelings with his family and the Chief Scientist from his recent voyage. The Chief Scientist and Voyage Manager work together to provide further support and advice. Mark references his pre-voyage online MNF health and wellbeing at sea eLearning module to better understand his feelings and is referred to professional counselling from CSIRO's EAP provider. Converge International offer voyage specific support and outline an effective action plan to combat Mark's symptoms and assist his successful transition back into family life.

4. Conclusion

Through a strategic approach to mental health and wellbeing at sea, the MNF prepares scientific participants for voyages, provides monitoring and support during a voyage and re-introduces participants back to life on shore. In doing so, the MNF delivers CSIRO's commitment towards a healthy, safe and productive working environment on *Investigator*.