

## RADIO FOR THE SICK

*The International Review in its August 1967 issue gave a description of the operating of the medical service by radio, started 36 years ago by the Netherlands Red Cross and which has since then been part of that country's medical equipment. Mention should also be made of most useful work being carried out in the same sphere which is now given below: <sup>1</sup>*

Seasickness can be a joke—but sickness on the high seas can pose grim problems. When in difficulties, ships' commanders throughout the world can, however, turn for help to the *Centro Internazionale Radio-Medico* in Rome. Usually abbreviated to CIRM (the initials of the Italian and French version of its title), it radios medical advice to any ship afloat, irrespective of its geographical location or the flag it flies.

In the 32 years CIRM has been operating, it has chalked up a remarkable list of achievements. Time and again it has provided long distance treatment at critical moments for men gravely ill, and whose transfer to land for hospital treatment was impossible.

All distress calls are sent either to the receiving station IRM, which is wholly devoted to the service of CIRM, or to station IAR (Rome Radio). When radio contact with Rome is lost, ships can often radio coastguard ships and stations of other countries and ask them to relay the message and reply.

At CIRM headquarters a team of six doctors is on duty round the clock. In addition, CIRM can call on the services of six hospital directors, a health inspector and 50 consultants—directors of clinics, hospital chiefs and specialists—who make themselves available when required.

Help is immediate: it includes a "radio-dispensary" for cases which are not serious; consultations between the ship's doctor (if there is one on board) and surgeons on shore; the transfer of a sick

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<sup>1</sup> See *World Health*, January-February 1968, WHO, Geneva.

person to another ship with a doctor on board, where necessary; or, if the ship is not too far from land, the transfer of a sick person to shore by motor-boat or helicopter for treatment in hospital.

In cases of serious illness the CIRM duty doctor will maintain close contact—three or four times daily—with the captain of the ship so that developments can be followed as closely as possible. (The CIRM doctor keeps a “ watch ” on the patients he has been helping to treat, even when they have been transferred to hospital on shore, and is thus able to ascertain whether the final diagnosis corresponds with the provisional diagnosis made on the basis of the radio message. In 90 per cent of cases, the provisional diagnosis by the CIRM doctor is confirmed.)

There are also a number of auxiliary CIRM services for the protection of seafarers' health. Each morning, on the basis of the WHO Epidemiological Bulletin, the list of ports infected by quarantinable diseases is brought up to date. Ten years ago CIRM set up a research section concerning health and disease at sea. It has produced over one hundred monographs and other studies on the health of the seafarer.

CIRM has also proposed the establishment of an international health service which would concern itself with the social diseases of the seafarer. An experiment of this type was in fact carried out several years ago: a CIRM doctor, with the cooperation of the Italian shipping authorities, carried out an investigation of such diseases in the ports of the peninsula. Other seafaring nations, including the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Portugal and the Netherlands, maintain in fishing areas ships specially designed to provide urgent medical help. CIRM was founded in Rome by Professor Guido Guida in 1935.

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