

Dr Julian Kilburn – General Practitioner

On disembarking from one of the world's most luxurious cruise liners, the Grand Princess, Doctor Julian Kilburn shares his experience of working in one of the most exciting, yet undiscovered areas of the medical profession – life at sea as a ship's doctor.

The medical departments of P&O Princess Cruises International, a division of Carnival Corp & plc, are home to today's most sophisticated international maritime medicine practices. A senior ship's doctor will use state-of-the-art equipment, within an on board medical practice and be exposed to invaluable and challenging experiences.

Doctor Kilburn, originally from York, England, has completed many assignments as senior ship's doctor since finishing his vocational training scheme (VTS) several years ago. "After many years of practicing medicine, I was ready for a refreshing change of direction," he explains. "I remembered a colleague who had been working on a cruise ship so I wrote to P&O Princess Cruises and was given the post as junior doctor on the Royal Princess in 1997."

Over several years, Doctor Kilburn has managed the medical department on a number of P&O Princess cruise ships whilst travelling the world. He has been involved in some of the most high profile, modern day maritime medicine cases.

"An average day is comprised of two hour passenger clinics in both the morning and afternoon, and two daily crew clinics lasting 1½ hours each, as well as the usual out of hours emergency calls. As you would expect, a ship's doctor is on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week, but there is support from a team of staff, typically a junior doctor and a number of nurses."

"The kind of daily cases we deal with range from minor trauma incidents such as trips or broken bones from the passengers and crew, to respiratory, cardiac complaints and even some exotic illnesses. In reality, a senior ship's doctor has the opportunity to operate an A&E centre, intensive care department and, often at a much earlier point in his or her career, run a traditional GP practice for the crew – a rare and incredibly rewarding and valuable career combination."

Aside from the day-to-day influx of typical complaints, Doctor Kilburn has faced a number of difficult decisions and unusual scenarios. Perhaps the most memorable incident was when a passenger brought onboard a common but highly contagious gastrointestinal virus called Norovirus. "After initially consulting with a few similar viral cases, I knew something was wrong," he explains. "I informed all senior officers and initiated the company's prepared response procedures. Passengers were treated symptomatically and given advice on how to avoid contracting the illness and prevent spread."

"This scenario gave me the opportunity to test the on-board management systems that I had developed after P&O Princess Cruises paid for me to take a major incident management course. I was in charge of a multi-disciplinary situation that was making front-page news every day – luckily shoreside management were carefully handling the press which allowed me to get on with my job."

"Occasionally we are required to disembark passengers who require further urgent medical attention outside of our onboard capabilities. A case I was involved in required my decision to evacuate a patient experiencing acute respiratory failure by

helicopter over the Bay of Biscay. The procedure affects everyone onboard to varying degrees – the captain needs to be consulted to gauge feasibility and passengers have to be marshalled.”

“A similar decision was required for a passenger experiencing internal gastric bleeding requiring surgery, on a different ship. Luckily we happened to be passing a US army facility for injured soldiers, so following quick negotiations, we were given permission to disembark the passenger for surgery.”

A typical P&O Princess Cruises’ medical department comprises of two doctors’ offices, nursing station and treatment areas, and a laboratory for testing illnesses from influenza to malaria. There are critical care rooms with cardiac monitoring facilities, patient wards, a well-stocked pharmacy, anaesthetic machine, x-ray facilities, and even teleradiology and telemedicine facilities, and satellite link-up so doctors can liaise with colleagues around the world.

Though three years post-graduate experience in A&E, ICU and CCU and current full registration is the minimum preferred requirement for entry, Doctor Kilburn soon discovered the other characteristics and skills required from a ship’s doctor. “A senior doctor is a manager, responsible for the department and team. Paperwork and meetings can be an initial challenge but beneficial to your career and similar to A&E practices. Sociability and a caring, personable approach must be combined with an understanding of the general management of the ship.”

“The key to enhancing your career is striking a balance between time spent onboard and off,” advises Doctor Kilburn. “I spent a year at sea and then left for two years to study for the MRCGP and FRCS (A&E) exams. I believe in being ‘future proof’ and taking appropriate qualifications that will enable ship’s doctors seamless re-entry back into the system.”

There are currently measures being put in place to so that ship’s doctors will be appraised to the same standard as UK doctors and progression will therefore be recognised throughout the profession.

With the responsibility and advancement of career, a ship’s doctor experiences the most luxurious holiday lifestyle. Aside from the four months leave each year, the port-intensive cruises allow you to visit some of the most desirable locations, take advantage of all onboard facilities and treat loved ones to greatly discounted holidays. Ship’s doctors also work in a tax-free environment with little opportunity to spend money.

“Overall, I would describe being at sea as the most interesting thing a doctor could possibly do. It can be a rollercoaster ride, especially when you are the key decision-maker in pressured situations, but it is highly rewarding as you get to work with your patients from start to finish and manage your own team. You will experience a wide range of emotions and need to be ready for anything!”