

Assessment by simulator? No way!

It is likely to be a long time, if ever, before certificates of competency are mainly or wholly tested by simulator, nor is it likely that retesting of masters for competency will become routine, according to senior UK maritime official Roger Towner.

The view that simulators should become the main way of assessing competency gained strong support at a meeting organised by the Nautical Institute in London in early June. The maritime industry was portrayed as being behind aviation in failing to make full use of simulators for assessing competency and for not retesting masters once they had passed their final examination. Continual assessment by simulation was

a fundamental part of aviation culture, said British Airways pilot Carl Phelan, who could not understand why shipping did not take the same approach.

Captain Towner, registrar general of shipping and seamen and chief examiner for the UK's Maritime and Coastguard Agency, strongly opposed the idea that oral examinations should be replaced by assessment using simulators. He argued that simulator assessment of Colregs knowledge would take far too long. It would not be possible, he said, to cover the huge range of situations that can be put to a candidate as part of an oral examination that takes just over an hour. A candidate's knowledge

of the rules can be tested very effectively using the traditional board with magnetic lights and shapes, Towner maintained. He also raised the issue of cost, pointing out that assessment by simulation would be expensive and it was unlikely that the shipping industry would willingly shoulder the extra cost.

The possible use of simulators for possible routine revalidation of certificates was also raised, with Phelan saying he was shocked that a master's examination took place only once, after which the resultant certificate never had to be reassessed. There was initial support from delegates for the aviation approach of continual revalidation through reassessment.

Towner however challenged the meeting on whether the masters present really wanted to be re-examined at annual intervals. He also said that IMO considered that continued service was a sufficient indication of continued competence and that any suggestion of annual reassessment would be a unnecessary gold plating of the convention and would effectively price UK certificates out of the market.

After the discussion Towner told *SAS* that using wooden cut-outs of ships on a table top to test ship-handling knowledge might seem a primitive method of assessment in the electronic age, but it was an effective way of testing an understanding of the principles.