



## **Healthwatch Kent Spotlight Series**

**Needing the NHS while out at sea: what prevents fishermen from using the NHS**



**April 2022**

## **Did you know that being a fisherman is one of the most dangerous jobs in the UK?!**

It's a tough job too; long hours, severe weather and strenuous physical demands. Fishermen will not earn a living if they are not at sea. They must respond to tides, locations of fish and the weather which makes onshore appointments difficult to plan for. They often have to choose between going out to sea to earn money, or attending a personal appointment. This difficult decision often means fishermen do not seek medical support, until they have a problem they cannot avoid any longer.

The number of fishermen in Kent is shrinking. In Ramsgate, there are now only 12 boats compared to the 28 boats which used to go out in 2018. It's an uncertain time for fishermen and their families.

We went to meet a group of fishermen in Ramsgate. They told us about the difficulties they face accessing healthcare.



## What are the headlines?



Commercial fishing poses both physical and mental health problems including injuries, kidney issues and suicide.



Fishermen tend to avoid making health appointments because they worry about losing money while they are onshore. This puts them at risk of late diagnosis.



Access to GPs is a challenge; fishermen are often unable to call and secure an appointment that day.



Fishermen over 50 are becoming more aware of their health and wellbeing and are more likely to seek medical support than younger fishermen.



“Drop in” health events based within the harbour allow fishermen to access healthcare services between fishing trips, preventing them from having to choose between their health and earning money.

## How did we go about it?

We visited fishermen and their families in Ramsgate in April 2022.

They were all taking part in the SeaFit Event which was offering free health MOTs and dental checks

Seven fishermen spent time talking to us about their experiences of healthcare. We used a semi-structured conversation framework to elicit the maximum answers.

## The feedback in more detail

### Physical and mental health risks

#### Injuries and Pain

All the fishermen we spoke to explained they had physical issues resulting from the demands of their job. Knee and elbow problems were the most common.



I need both my knees replacing, I can tell. They are so painful but I can't be off my boat for long. I wouldn't earn any money. I have a family to support



I wake up, shake my knees and hear them rattle!



#### Kidney Problems

Three fishermen told us they had experienced kidney problems because they don't drink enough, or urinate enough, while out on their boat.



I know I don't drink enough when I'm out fishing. Just have a few sips of water over the day. I'm usually out for 8-10 hours a day. You're just always so busy having to do something. I'm too busy to stop for a drink, even though I know I should. And it takes ages to get out of my kit so I don't really go to the toilet either. Kidney problems are really common amongst the guys here because they're all dehydrated.



## Cancer

Three fishermen told us that they felt more aware of their risk of cancer since one of their fishing community had recently passed away.



We're men of a certain age and we know we're at risk of cancer, especially prostate. I think there's a bit of a mentality of 'until there's an obvious issue, we don't bother getting checked'. A guy we all know died recently of cancer so I think that's been a wake up call for us. That's probably why some of the guys have taken the time today to come and get checked.



## Suicide

The fishermen told us that three men within their fishing community had taken their own lives due to the stress of earning an income through their trade. They explained that government quotas make it very difficult to make a sufficient wage from fishing as they are restricted as to how much fish they can catch.



Three men we know have killed themselves - three fishermen. There are so many rules about what we can and can't catch and how much. It's hard to make a living and pay the bills. I think it got too much for them. You can't just change trade, up and leave the job, because you have invested into it. You have your boat and equipment, which is becoming harder to sell or pass on.



## Stress

All the men we spoke to said that fishing is a very stressful job, mainly due to the pressure of having to catch fish or not get paid. We heard about one fisherman who couldn't fish for a year due to having cancer.



He wasn't able to catch enough fish that year, due to his cancer. His fishing licence was revoked and given to someone else as there's only a limited amount available. When he was fit again he had to wait until a new licence was available. You don't feel like you have any other option but to just keep going, even if you have a health problem.



We asked them how their families feel about their job.



It's just something they learn to get on with and get used to



## Which healthcare services do you feel like you need the most and why?

### Access to GPs

All the fishermen told us that better access to GPs would help them with their various health concerns.

They told us that most fishermen in their community are over 50 and are now realising the need to seek early medical support and to pay more attention to their health, whereas most of the younger fisherman will often overlook the issues. A very small number of young fishermen made use of the free health and dental services during the SeaFit event.

Generally, amongst fishermen, the use of healthcare services is very low.

## What are the barriers preventing you from accessing the services you need?

### GP opening hours

The fishermen told us that they are usually at sea during GP opening hours and by the time they are back onshore, there are no appointments left or the GP is closed.



I could do with going to the GP about my elbow as it's getting worse. But nowadays the GPs want you to call at 8.30 in the morning on the day you want an appointment. I just can't call at that time. By the time I'm back onshore, all the appointments have been taken.



### Using online services

One fisherman advised that his wife organises eConsults for him as he doesn't really use technology and would prefer to talk to someone in person.

### Deciding between earning money or going to an appointment

Having to travel to a GP or dental appointment could result in the fishermen missing optimal weather and tide conditions which could mean they lose a day's wages for just one appointment. Often this puts them off getting help.

## How could the services that are important to you be made more accessible?

### Having more “drop-in” health events on the harbour

We were told that having this “drop in” event over two days was really convenient for the fishermen as it allowed them to get a health check between fishing trips.

The fishermen are a close community so they contacted each other to raise awareness of this event.



I've been fishing for 40 years and this is the first health event that I've ever seen. Something like this, more often, would be great. It encourages all of us to take responsibility for our health together



One fisherman advised that he would've liked it if a GP could've attended in person and believed that service would have been really beneficial.

### **Next Steps**

We will share our findings with SeaFit and support them in raising awareness and organisational representation for future health events.

We will share our report with East Kent Health and Social Care Partnership and the local Primary Care Network.

We will contact the local Primary Care Network to find out any alternative GP opening times that may be more convenient for the Fishermen community.

**If you would like to chat with us about the report you can reach us through the following routes:**



**Online:**  
[www.healthwatchkent.co.uk](http://www.healthwatchkent.co.uk)



**By Telephone:**  
**Healthwatch Kent Freephone**  
**0808 801 01 02**



**By Email:**  
[Info@healthwatchkent.co.uk](mailto:Info@healthwatchkent.co.uk)



**By Text:**  
**Text us on 07525 861 639. By**  
**texting 'NEED BSL', Healthwatch's**  
**British Sign Language interpreter**  
**will make contact.**

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