

## INTERVIEW

**Michael Spiteri**, health and safety officer at Valletta Gateway Terminals (VGT), talks about health and safety issues to **Tanja Cilia**

**A**CCIDENT statistics show that modern methods of cargo handling have greatly reduced the amount of accidents in ports. However, this reassuring statistic is accompanied by another, more alarming one: Given the nature of modern port work, when accidents do happen, the injuries are likely to be much more severe.

Valletta Gateway Terminals therefore shoulders considerable responsibility for the health and safety of all its staff, as well as for all the other personnel involved in cargo handling.

Soon after VGT took over port operations in July 2006, the management approved a safety plan and procedures to improve performance in this area. The first step was to carry out a risk assessment for the VGT concession terminals at Laboratory Wharf, Magazine Wharf and the Deep Water Quay.

It then adopted a "best practice" level of standards for all the operations at its terminals, covering industrial safety, environmental health and the quality of the services offered. The policy includes targets for ongoing improvements and benchmarks. These standards are monitored and promoted by a health and safety unit set up specifically for this purpose.

Regular meetings are organised for staff and there is in-house training on a variety of safety issues.

For Mr Spiteri, one of the most important aspects is avoiding accidents and investigating mishaps to ensure that procedures are put into place to ensure that they do not recur.

"I must track potentially dangerous situations, as well as investigate those that actually result in injury, as part and parcel of my daily inspection of all areas. This helps ensure that future accidents are avoided," he said.

Part of the challenge is to have policies that cover the various types of cargo – unitised and loose cargo, dry bulk and vehicles – each of which has its own safety risks. Different aspects of the operation are being singled out for special attention. For example, VGT is in the final stages of enhancing the standard operating procedure, and issuing guidelines for health and safety practices for Roll-On, Roll-Off (ro-ro).

"The ro-ro vessels are increasing in size and complexity and there are more cargo and terminal traffic movements, so VGT felt it was necessary to increase the focus on safety in this sector," Mr Spiteri said.

Every week there are between six to eight ro-ro vessels berthed at the wharves, handling from 500 to 600 semi-trailer moves between them.

"So imagine the level of activity when freight is being unloaded while other cargo is being prepared for shipment," explains Mr Spiteri.

"Ships cannot be kept waiting. The smooth flow of payload is crucial to the business environment. You have to



MATTHEW MIRABELLI



maintain a delicate balance between speed and efficiency and safety."

VGT can lead but it is important for the employees and personnel to follow.

"The most critical factor, if you want to achieve real behavioural change and awareness, is to communicate with and effectively involve the workforce. You have to put across the unequivocal message that below standard and unsafe behaviour cannot be tolerated. In this way, people learn to understand the reasons behind the policy, rather than being merely instructed to follow orders.

"It is ludicrous that some workers actually put on their hard hats when they see me approaching. I want them to understand why this equipment is necessary in a hard hat area," Mr Spiteri said.

One sees people working atop containers. One tiny error of judgement, or a slip, could be fatal.

"Certainly, container-top safety is a cause for concern. Various ways have

now been devised to ensure stevedore and port worker safety, when they have to work on the tops of deck stows."

Internationally, harnesses are sometimes used when transporting workers from the quay to the container. However, they do restrict movement for some workers.

"We try to work together to sustain best practices when working on top of containers," Mr Spiteri said.

Another aspect of the policy takes into account new laws on the environment, particularly those involving the handling of dry bulk cargo, which tends to produce copious amounts of dust. Oil spillages, water ballast from ships, and waste present even more difficulties. To this end, the waste management plan has also been concluded.

VGT is a joint venture between Portek of Singapore and Tumas Group, and benefits greatly from the experience of its international partner, which has an

enviable track record of health and safety.

"From the start, Portek addressed the challenge of improving safety while reducing turnaround times of vessels, and demonstrated a very strong commitment to integrating these strategies within the entire business process. This is but the beginning, and there is a long way to go. However, we have already seen a drastic transformation in the Valletta ports. This is Asian maritime talent and expertise at its best."

When asked what his expectations were, Mr Spiteri said he hoped workers at the port terminals and on vessels would take their individual safety responsibilities seriously and always be mindful of the health and safety of those around them.

"In the realm of health and safety, every day brings different risks and hazards in our industry. The safest working methods are the most productive, and make good business sense," concluded Mr Spiteri.