

Vaccination key but testing still critical

Vikand Solutions' Peter Hult shares the latest COVID-19 protocols with **Anne Kalosh**.

Testing and vaccines are the two most critical components to getting the cruise industry back and running, says Peter Hult, ceo, Vikand Solutions, a leading maritime medical operations and public health provider.

When it comes to crew, some lines have been able to get vaccines thanks to good relationships with countries where their ships are located and others have been able to run crew through jurisdictions like Singapore where seafarers get priority vaccination as essential workers.

Today, there's a surplus of vaccines but it's very difficult for private entities like Vikand to obtain those because they're allocated to governments. However, Hult is starting to see a willingness to work with enterprises like Vikand and, potentially, cruise lines.

'We are working with the vaccine manufacturers very proactively to obtain vaccines not only for our clients but for the totality of the cruise industry,' Hult says. This will depend on location.

The UK looks like a good place to start, so it's possible crew vaccination could be facilitated soon in a port like Southampton.

But Hult notes that 'Even with vaccination, we are going to see a strong testing regime.' It's too early to know if cruise line protocols

will still require passengers to take a COVID-19 test at home before traveling to the ship. It's almost inevitable, though, that a vaccination passport will become a component of travel, by air and sea. That may offset the need for getting tested at home prior to travel, yet Hult expects cruisers will still have to be tested at embarkation.



Peter Hult

Destinations like the Bahamas, where

Crystal Cruises and Royal Caribbean International will be homeporting, currently call for a PCR test at home and an antigen test after arrival. Crystal mandates vaccination and will require an antigen test at embarkation. St. Maarten, the base for Celebrity Cruises' restart, requires a PCR test at home for travellers originating from high-risk countries but allows an antigen test for travellers from the US and Canada. Apart from vaccination, Royal and Celebrity have said it's too soon to specify their additional protocols for these sailings.

And Hult says testing will continue to be important in Europe. European countries



generally accept antigen tests and it's expected that cruisers will be tested at embarkation, as lines like MSC Cruises, TUI Cruises and Costa have been doing.

The US has indicated everyone must be tested at embarkation and disembarkation, details awaited.

'Testing is going to be part of our future,' Hult says.

The International Air Transport Association is developing an IATA Travel Pass, a digital platform for passengers to share their tests and vaccination results in a verifiable, safe and privacy-protecting manner, and the EU is looking at a similar type of electronic document.

Hult hopes vaccination passports will have an open-source approach that individual platforms can plug into.

In Europe, his company works with DasLab, which created a platform to track testing of guests and crew there, and Vikand facilitated the relationship between TUI and DasLab. In the US, Vikand's partner is Health ID, developed by Quantum Material Corp. Hult anticipates Health ID will be able to add vaccination data from a passport when that becomes available.

'That will help us to consolidate and amalgamate vaccine and testing data. So, testing when you leave home, testing when you get to the terminal, testing while you're on board and testing when you disembark we think will be very efficiently managed with some sort of an application that you have on your phone,' he says.

Terminal testing breathalyser solution

Vikand Terminal Testing Solutions is led by gm Damien O'Connor, who brings 30 years of experience with cruise lines including Silversea, Royal Caribbean, Celebrity, Disney and Carnival.

This cruise terminal protocol uses portable kiosks with breathalyser technology developed by Tera Group. The noninvasive screening involves blowing into a tube, with results obtained in under a minute and accuracy comparable to a point-of-care PCR test. Should the breathalyser indicate a positive result, a diagnostic PCR test is warranted.



Damien O'Connor

This protocol will be managed in terminals around the world through a partnership with Intercruises Shoreside & Port Services. Intercruises is currently working with the authorities in Spain, specifically Barcelona and the Canary Islands, and engaging with ports and operators in the UK, Greece, Italy, Germany and Netherlands.

Since Vikand Terminal Testing Solutions is an American solution, US embassies' commercial attaches in Europe are communicating how it works to cruise, port and terminal operators via virtual briefings.

'This is a really strong, positive initiative from the US side that we're excited about bringing to the European side,' Hult says, adding that it's a 'flexible, easy-to-install testing solution, very affordable with high accuracy and high throughput without any medical staff required and it's noninvasive. It takes 40 seconds to do.'

Medical staff aren't needed for the breathalyser screening, however a medical person will be stationed at each terminal to conduct any needed PCR swab testing.

Vikand's goal is to be ready when the cruise industry is starting in earnest, which Hult anticipates in May. That could be for Royal Caribbean's fully vaccinated sailings from Haifa, Israel, or possibly cruises from Barcelona.

In other COVID-19-related developments, Vikand expects the cruise industry to mandate a new infectious disease officer position, as recommended by the Healthy Sail Panel and indicated by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Currently, this is voluntary but most lines have already instituted the role.

Vikand manages this position for many clients along with their full infectious disease programs. And the company is partnering with Simwave, a leading maritime simulator training expert, to create what Hult touts as the world's first maritime school of medicine and public health. Its first module is the infectious disease officer training course.

Other actions include upgraded medical centers and updated COVID management protocols and procedures including having agreements in place with shoreside medical facilities to facilitate the evacuation of sick people. This is part of European protocols and a requirement in the US.

'We cannot create an environment that is 100% bullet-proof,' Hult says. There are bound to be cases, and those could range from someone testing positive but asymptomatic to someone who's a little sick to someone whose condition is seriously deteriorating. So isolation, quarantine and evacuation protocols are musts, and lines will have those in place.

Contact tracing is massively important and Hult thinks good solutions exist, like TraceSafe, which has partnered with Tritan Software. And Royal Caribbean, for example, has a proprietary wearable, the Tracelet.

Ships have all identified isolation and quarantine zones. Many on-board medical centers are now equipped with oxygen generators, instead of bottles, so they don't run out of oxygen. Some of the bigger lines have upgraded facilities to create higher-level emergency-care wards. Medical teams on board are generally going to be 25% larger than before.

As far as testing capabilities on the ships, it depends on where they operate and, to some extent, vary by cruise line. Viking Cruises invested in full RT-PCR labs while others make due with less costly (and less accurate) antigen tests, currently accepted by most European countries.

'There is no uniform approach, and the [jurisdiction's] approach can change from day to day,' Hult says.