

Access hatches – a not so obvious danger

During the course of the year the Managers have been notified of three accidents involving dockworkers falling through or tripping over open access hatches to lashing bridges on container ships.

In one case the dockworker concerned sustained a serious injury, resulting in the loss of an eye.

The common feature of all three accidents is that the victims had previously gained access to the lashing bridge via the access hatch, so were aware of its existence. Each of the hatches was fitted with a lid, or cover, which should have been closed after the victim negotiated the ladder to the lashing bridge. In the case referred to above, the dockworker inadvertently put his foot into the open hatch and fell, hitting his head on an adjacent turnbuckle. In another case the dockworker fell through the open hatch, injuring his chest and shoulder and in the third incident the dockworker stepped backwards into the open hatch, injuring his leg.

Whilst the accidents should not result in claims for compensation, primarily because they were caused by the carelessness of the individuals concerned, they nevertheless pose the question, could they have been avoided? The clear answer is yes. The next question is, what could be done to prevent similar accidents? It is apparent from the two photographs (right) that the access hatches are not readily apparent, particularly when the

ambient lighting conditions are not good. The fact that hatchways are often painted the same colour as the walkway serves only to camouflage the existence of the hatchways. Warning notices should be displayed on the underside of the hatch lid or other prominent places, along the following lines 'Warning – To prevent accidents, close hatch lid after accessing the bridge.'

Hatchways should be painted a contrasting colour or black and yellow hazard stripes painted around the edge of all openings. Hopefully then, if the careless stevedore or crewmember fails to close the hatch behind him he might at least be alerted to its presence after completing his task and returning along the lashing bridge.

