

Irene Saroglou-Tsakou

The doctor who modernized marine medicine

Behind every successful man there is a strong woman, say the people. What better example than Captain Panagiotis Tsakos and his wife, Dr Irene Saroglou-Tsakou. A low-profile person, the doctor, as she is called by friends, acquaintances and by the Tsakos Group's 2,250 employees and seamen, chose to devote her scientific knowledge to - and indeed become a pioneer in - marine medicine. "We have a practice at Megaron Macedonia. Like it or not, Captain Tsakos has a wife who is a doctor and spends three times as much on medical expenses than other companies," she tells us with a smile.

Far from the limelight and public events, she was never attracted to the sparkling world of celebrity, in which she could have monopolized the attention of the media had she wished to.

We met in the late afternoon on a Thursday at the Megaron Macedonia, the headquarters of the Tsakos Group, a world-renowned shipping empire.

Smiling and serene, she received us in the seminar room used to train company officers in the use of the defibrillator once week. Thanks to the doctor's efforts, the Tsakos Group is the first worldwide, outside the United States, to equip its offices and ships with a state-of-the-art defibrillator, creating a sense of security among its work force. In addition, at the Megaron Macedonia there is a fully equipped practice on the 6th floor, headed by Dr Irene Saroglou-Tsakou, as well as a gym.

"On board the ships we also practise preventative medicine. The means of prevention include a major investment made by the company, exceeding the



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"The means of prevention include a major investment" says Irene Saroglou - Tsakou

sum of \$100,000 up until now. Over the past eight years the ships have been equipped with state-of-the-art defibrillators. They have already been installed on 20 of the fleet's vessels. The ships chosen first are those serving long-haul routes because that's where the captain needs support," she points out. She adds: "Seminars are held weekly at the company's offices. Training concerns bridge officers and engineers. Even if the defibrillator saves one life, it will be worth the investment. Thank God, it hasn't been needed on board the ships."

The defibrillator

As the doctor explains to us, the concept of the defibrillator appeared ten years ago in the United States. "When I was informed as a physician that all the major companies in the United States have a defibrillator in all their offices numbering over 150 staff members, we decided to buy them for our company too.

"When we have a myocardial infarction we all know that it is a fatal disorder. In this case the defibrillator combats the tachycardia, which affects the left ventricle. People who suffer the effects of such a major tachycardia cannot possibly survive for more than a few minutes. During this time we apply the defibrillator to the patient's chest. The apparatus emits a current which "attacks" the tachycardia, restoring the normal heart beat," she explains. She adds that: "The defibrillator saves lives, providing admission to an intensive care unit follows. We have defibrillators at the Megaron Macedonia where 220 employees work. We ordered them from the United States seven years ago. We were the first company worldwide, outside the United States, to acquire a defibrillator seven years ago. We renew the apparatuses as they are updated and decrease in size, thus becoming easier to use. For this reason the presence of a doctor is not necessary and

this is important. Only a few lessons are needed."

The advantage of the modern defibrillator is that as soon as it is applied one can see if the patient is suffering a heart attack or not. In the case of another ailment due for example to a fainting spell the apparatus does not emit a current, thus informing the user that there is no danger. "We hope that all our departments dealing with people will be equipped with a defibrillator. I began the effort to acquire defibrillators before the Olympic Games of Athens," she says.

Homer and... medicine

As Dr Saroglou-Tsakou revealed, "we are the first shipping company where, along with each of its newbuildings, from its maiden voyage, the captain also receives a defibrillator. Instructions are given as soon as you open the apparatus. We don't want to turn bridge officers and engineers into doctors. However, we would like them to be able to provide first aid should the need arise during the voyage." She adds: "In all emergency cases on board the ship the captain undertakes a great responsibility. A saying by Homer would be fitting in this case: "He becomes a physician and naturally then he is the better than everyone else." This is why the Marine Manual is needed."

The Marine Manual

The doctor remembers: "When I presented my third book, the professor emeritus of Pathology and Therapeutics of the University of Athens, George Daikos, said: "Many marine manuals have been written occasionally, but instead of good they did harm. I don't see this danger in this book." My sixth book, for which I am to be awarded on 15 February by the Cardiological Society, is now available."

In her office there is an icon of the Virgin Mary from the Monastery of Sina, the characteristic of which is the tear running from one of Mary's eyes. On each floor there is a team that will be called upon should this be necessary.



Foto G. Christakis

"Over the past eight years the ships have been equipped with state-of-the-art defibrillators" says Irene Saroglou - Tsakou

The outset

It all began almost thirty years ago. "Thirty years ago, when I chose to practice Marine Medicine, I saw the inadequacies there were in a publication also regarding the treatment of a patient on board a ship. I tried to do something because I saw the hardship suffered by seamen. Perhaps if I weren't the wife of Mr Tsakos I wouldn't have gone down this road, as in any other case I could have been a socialite rather than devoted to medicine," Dr Saroglou-Tsakou stresses. "I then wrote the first book, the first Marine Manual. All shipping companies bought the book. I never asked for money, providing each company made a donation, according to its conscientiousness, to the Hadjikyriakio Orphanage and the Argo Association for seamen's children with special needs. I didn't sell it, nor did I give it away. I gave it away for philanthropic purposes."

Course in time

Dr Irene Saroglou-Tsakou was born in Piraeus. Her father, Panagiotis Saroglou, was a military officer and hailed from Asia Minor. Her mother, Panani, was from the island of Chios. She graduated from high school in Piraeus and was admitted to the School of Medicine of the University of Athens, having achieved among the top ten grades in the admission examinations. When she graduated from medical

school she attended a course taught by Professor Daikos specializing in pathology, and proceeded to obtain her doctorate. She then attended a course in cardiology, in which she also specializes.

As a pathologist and cardiologist she worked for the Piraeus Port Workers Insurance Fund and other funds for many years, while her private practice worked with various shipping companies.

She is married to Captain Panagiotis Tsakos, whom she has stood by in his efforts towards the family's success, and has two children, Nikos and Maria. Her interests also include philology and literature, the outcome of which are the books she gave us: "The Mercantile Marine of Kardamyla 1850-1950", "Kardamylitissa" (1997), "Memories of a Physician" (1999) and "Marine Medical Manual" (2001).

Her love of all seamen, especially her sympathy for the seamen's women - their mothers, wives, sisters - incited her to propose at her own expense the construction of the statue "The Kardamylitissa" (The Woman of Kardamyla), which was erected in Kardamyla of Chios at a site from which it can be easily seen welcoming seamen home.

She is distinguished for her seriousness, sense of responsibility, and love for her fellow citizens, especially for seafarers. This love of hers for people, family, seamen and shipping has won her time and priorities. ■