



Captain Lord's uremia

Kaptan Lord'un üremisi

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ABSTRACT

The hundredth anniversary of the worst ever civilian maritime disaster was also the fiftieth anniversary of the death of arguably its most controversial character, Captain Stanley Lord, skipper of the *Californian*, a "tramp" steamer that became entrapped in ice just off the Grand Banks of Newfoundland on April 14, 1912. Although Lord was faulted in two widely publicized inquiries for failing to respond to *Titanic's* distress signals, there may have actually been a medical reason for his behavior because he suffered from chronic renal disease and most likely had some secondary cognitive impairment due to this disease. An assessment of Lord's health history shows that he fractured his leg as a young man; suffered from poor eyesight, which led to his premature retirement from the sea by the age of 50; and eventually died from renal failure. Furthermore, his death certificate alludes to previous uremic episodes, perhaps encompassing the time period of the *Titanic* accident. Lord may have been under some pressure not to reveal his infirmity because doing so could have further jeopardized his career. The literature abounds with evidence that renal insufficiency negatively affects cognition, often years before progression to end-stage renal disease. Captain Lord's failure to act in a crisis situation may serve as a case in point.

Key words: 20th century; medical history; mild cognitive impairment; renal insufficiency.

ÖZET

Bu zamana kadarki en kötü sivil denizcilik faciasının yüzüncü yıl dönümü, aynı zamanda 14 Nisan 1912'de Newfoundland'ın tam Grand Banks açıklarında buza saplanmış olan bir yük gemisinin muhtemelen en tartışmalı karakteri olan *Kaliforniyalı* reis Kaptan Stanley Lord'un ellinci ölüm yıl dönümüdür. Lord, iki geniş kamuoyu soruşturmasında *Titanik*'in tehlike sinyallerine cevap vermeyi ihmal etmekten suçlanmasına rağmen aslında onun davranışı tıbbi sebeplerden olmuş olabilir, kronik böbrek hastalığı çektiği için muhtemelen bundan kaynaklanan ikincil bilişsel bozukluğu vardı. Lord'un sağlık geçmişinin bir incelemesi, genç bir adamken bacağı kırıldığını; 50 yaşlarında denizcilikten erken emekliliğine yol açan zayıf görme sıkıntısı çektiğini ve sonuç olarak böbrek yetmezliğinden öldüğünü göstermektedir. Dahası, onun ölüm belgesi, muhtemelen *Titanik* kazasının zamanını kapsayan önceki üremik ataklara değinmektedir. Lord herhangi bir kusuru ortaya çıkartmamak için biraz baskı altında olabilirdi, çünkü bu onun kariyerini daha da riske atardı. Literatür, böbrek yetmezliğinin bilişselliği olumsuz etkilediğinin kanıtlarıyla doludur; son evre böbrek hastalığına ilerleme öncesi çoğu yıllar, Kaptan Lord'un bir kriz durumunda görevini yapma yetersizliği bu bakımdan bir örnek teşkil edebilir.

Anahtar sözcükler: 20. yüzyıl; böbrek yetmezliği; hafif bilişsel bozukluk; tıbbi öykü.

Introduction

Did renal disease play a role in the worst ever civilian maritime disaster? Shortly after the *Titanic* sank off the Grand Banks of Newfoundland in mid-April 1912, the world's attention focused on Captain Stanley Lord (Figure 1), skipper of the *Californian* (Figure 2), a 6,000-ton "tramp" steamer that had become entrapped in ice near the *Titanic's* final

position while hauling a load of scrap metal from London to Boston. Possessing both an Extra Master as well as a Master certificate, the *Californian's* 34-year-old captain was well qualified for this office, which was his fourth command. After having been passed over for a senior officer position on one of the new *Olympic*-class superliners that had been constructed to keep up with the burgeoning transatlantic passenger traffic, he reluctantly adjusted to life on a freighter and advanced his career

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patiently. In early April 1912, the *Californian* was inbound from New Orleans with a load of textiles, and due to rough seas that she had encountered en route, approximately 600 bales of cotton were water damaged in her holds. After arrival in London, Lord spent a fair amount of time in the offices of the Leyland Line, which owned the ship, hearing how the company could not afford such losses, and he assured his superiors that his next voyage would be uneventful.

Case report

Upon realizing his predicament on the evening of April 14, 1912, Lord decided to park his ship rather than attempt a risky journey through the ice on a moonless night. Furthermore, he ordered wireless operator Cyril Evans to warn all of the ships in the area of the danger ahead. The *Californian*'s crew was therefore rightly concerned to notice the lights of a large ocean liner that was appearing to their southeast. Fearing that this ship was the *Titanic* on her maiden voyage, Lord instructed Evans to send a special ice warning to the *Titanic* before Evans retired that night. This message was received by the *Titanic*'s radio operators, who unfortunately did not relay its contents to the officers on the bridge. Lord himself then retired for the day, and he instructed Second Officer Herbert Stone, who was on the midnight watch, to inform him of any changes in the situation.

What happened over the next few hours aboard the *Californian* has been the subject of dozens of books over the past century, as well as that of an occasional acrimonious debate among the "Lordites" and the "anti-Lordites" on both sides of the Atlantic.^[1,2] When Stone and the ship's apprentice, James Gibson, were alone on the bridge, they saw the vessel stop abruptly, appear to put out half her lights, and subsequently fire off eight white rockets. Although the two men shared concern over this strange apparition, they relayed only their observations to the captain, who was below the deck, and he advised that they try to contact the ship by Morse lamp. Moreover, because Evans was asleep, they were all oblivious to the increasingly desperate SOS calls that were crackling through the frigid air. After the lights had finally disappeared from their view, Stone reported to Lord that the unknown ship had sailed away; however, when Evans resumed duty the next morning, the *Californian*'s crew quickly learned what had just happened nearby.

Discussion

One of the notable results of the American^[3] and British^[4] inquiries following the accident was the impetus for what eventually became known as "crew resource management"; i.e., the important participatory role of subordinates in problem solving. The inquiries, however, were more of an inquisition of Captain Lord,




Figure 1. Captain Stanley Lord (1877-1962)



Figure 2. SS *Californian* (1901-1915)

CERTIFIED COPY OF AN ENTRY OF DEATH



GIVEN AT THE GENERAL REGISTER OFFICE

Application Number 3565736-1

| REGISTRATION DISTRICT | |
|-----------------------|---|
| 1962 | DEATH in the Sub-district of Wallasey in the County Borough of Wallasey |

| Columns:- | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
|-----------|---|------------------|------|----------|---|--|---|---------------------------------|---------------------------|
| No. | When and where died | Name and surname | Sex | Age | Occupation | Cause of death | Signature, description and residence of informant | When registered | Signature of registrar |
| 67 | Twenty-fourth January 1962 31 Stanley Avenue Wallasey | Stanley LORD | Male | 84 years | of 13 Kirkway Wallasey Master Mariner (Retired) | I(a) Pyelonephritis and Renal Failure II Age Previous uraemic episodes Certified by D. G. Walker M.B. | Stanley F. Lord Son In attendance 13 Kirkway Wallasey | Twenty-fifth January 1962 | A. C. Bladen Registrar |

CERTIFIED to be a true copy of an entry in the certified copy of a Register of Deaths in the District above mentioned.

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Figure 3. Captain Lord's death certificate, which shows that he suffered from chronic kidney disease

who was blamed for the loss of over 1500 souls by failing to respond appropriately to the sighting of white rockets, a regulation distress call. Since then, many theories have been proposed to explain Lord's inaction, all of which have been refuted either by eyewitnesses or by modern scholars of the tragedy. Why would an experienced seaman such as Lord ignore a distress signal? Was he unarousable? This statement would contradict the testimony of Chief Officer George Stewart, who said that upon assuming the midnight watch from Stone at 4 A.M., he immediately reported to the captain that a ship that was firing rockets during the night had been sighted; Lord replied that he was aware of the situation.^[4] Was Lord drunk? Lord's sworn affidavit specified that he did not drink, and he was widely known to have been a teetotaler.^[5] Was he a sociopath who was unwilling to take risks for others, as some scholars have suggested?^[6] Given his credentials, Lord certainly would have known the significance of white rockets. Lord also would have known that, keeping moral obligations aside, he was under no legal obligation to aid a ship in distress if he honestly believed that, in doing so, he would be unduly risking the safety of his own ship and crew. Lord could have made an entry to that effect in the ship's log, but he did not even do this: why?

A more plausible explanation could be that Captain Lord was compromised in some way. In fact, a review of Lord's medical history shows that he experienced several symptoms

of chronic kidney disease; namely, he had fractured his leg as a young man; he suffered from poor eyesight, which led to his premature retirement from the sea by the age of 50; and he eventually succumbed to renal failure.^[7] Additionally, his death certificate (Figure 3) alludes to "previous uremic episodes," and although their time course is not specified, Lord may have had a prolonged uremic tendency that affected his judgment. The harmful effects of renal insufficiency on cognition, often years before progression to end-stage kidney disease, have been well described in the literature.^[8,9] Lord was plagued by this illness throughout his career, and in fact, he sought medical attention in Antwerp several years after the *Titanic* accident for treatment of "a delicate member of the human organization," according to his superiors.^[10] His managers were likely attuned to the effects of poor health on job performance, and hence, they found a substitute for him until he had recovered. However, if he was ill in 1912, why did he not use this point for his defense? It is quite possible that he did not wish to jeopardize his career any further by admitting this infirmity, as he was supporting his wife and young son. Instead, Lord always maintained the stance that the ship that was firing the rockets could not have been the *Titanic*, for a variety of reasons. Lord's state of confusion that night was evident when he returned to the deck on the morning of April 15th and saw a ship on the horizon, which later was revealed to be the *Carpathia*, the ship that was lending help to survivors in the *Titanic's* lifeboats. When the crew members asked Lord

whether the *Californian* should contact the stranger, he replied “No, she is not sending up any rockets now.”^[14]

However, several questions remain to be answered if we are to ascribe even a partial role of renal disease in Captain Lord’s behavior. People with chronic kidney disease tend to be somewhat somnolent and rather moody.^[11,12] Is there any evidence that Lord exhibited signs of either of these attributes? As stated above, the evidence argues that the captain did not sleep through the entire disaster, although someone with renal insufficiency would naturally have had difficulty performing up to par in such a demanding role as that of a ship commander. In addition, it was noted by multiple sources that Lord was somewhat aloof from his crew; it is debatable whether this characteristic represented a mere personality quirk or was a sign of a more serious medical condition.^[16] Nevertheless, underlying renal disease may explain his constellation of symptoms. Considering this possibility, it is remarkable that he was able to function in such a challenging career for another 15 years after the *Titanic* sank; poor health forced him to resign in 1927.

Lord Mersey, who headed the British inquiry, was “Merseyless” in his condemnation of Lord, whom he held responsible for the tragic number of deaths. Following this very public reprimand, Lord briefly considered moving to America;^[13] however, eventually he decided to maintain his home in Liverpool, lived quietly and had only one other notable incident at sea that involved the collision of his ship with a barge in Hampton Roads, Virginia.^[14] Eventually, he was willing to “put the [*Titanic*] matter behind him,” according to his son, Stanley Tutton Lord, until the release of the film *A Night to Remember* in 1958, which portrayed both Lord and the *Californian*’s crew as incompetents. Several years before Lord died, he made a final attempt to clear his name for posterity. He was aided in this endeavor by Mr. Leslie Harrison, secretary of the Mercantile Marine Service Association, of which Lord had been a member since 1897. After Lord’s death in 1962, Harrison and Stanley Tutton Lord tried unsuccessfully on multiple occasions to have Lord Mersey’s 1912 censure overturned; however, the rediscovery of the *Titanic* in 1985 invigorated their case with new information, most importantly regarding the exact location of the accident. In 1992, the British Board of Trade, which had finally agreed to review the case against Captain Lord in light of these new data, issued the following findings: Even if the *Californian* had responded immediately to the *Titanic*’s first distress call, the *Californian* was indeed too far away from her to have made a significant dent in the casualty count, given the conditions in the North Atlantic on April 14-15, 1912. Nevertheless, Lord was still faulted for not making a rescue attempt.

No such controversy surrounds the demise of the *Californian*. The *Californian* fell victim to a torpedo attack by a German

U-boat in 1915, and she lies at the bottom of the Mediterranean after having sunk off the coast of Greece; her wreckage has never been found. As for the case against the former captain of the *Californian*, the unanswered questions about his health may raise a reasonable doubt in history’s courtroom.

Conflict of Interest / Çıkar Çatışması

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