

Summary report of the annual National Institute for Occupational Health Construction Industry Consultative Workshop

The National Institute for Occupational Health (NIOH), a division of the National Health Laboratory Service (NHLS), hosted the second national consultative workshop on the construction industry, on 17 May 2018 in Johannesburg, South Africa. The purpose of the workshop was to create a platform for social dialogue, knowledge sharing, and paving a way forward for improving occupational and environmental health and safety (OEHS) in the South African construction industry. The workshop was attended by the construction industry tripartite-plus group (government, trade unions, employer organisations, and civil society), the International Labour Organization (ILO), and OEHS professionals and academics.

Workshop objectives

- To outline the relevant legal and legislative framework for the control and management of occupational diseases in the construction industry
- To highlight the importance of occupational skin diseases and ergonomic injuries in the construction industry
- To discuss the provision of preventive OEHS services, including occupational risk assessments and medical surveillance, while emphasising a gender-inclusive and ethical approach, in the construction industry

Dr Sophia Kisting, Executive Director of the NIOH, gave the opening address. She thanked all participants for joining with the NIOH in the quest for improved OEHS in the construction industry. She then highlighted that the majority of construction workers do not have access to occupational health services, or even general health services, in most instances. This has the potential to affect these vulnerable workers negatively due to increased financial constraints, pushing them further into poverty. She concluded by highlighting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with emphasis on SDGs 1-5, 8 and 10, saying that these goals are all concerned with the elimination of poverty and hunger; improving health while providing quality education; and entrenching gender equity and equality while providing decent jobs and economic growth to all.

Dr Gregory Kew, an occupational medicine specialist, spoke on 'Health and hygiene imperatives in occupational, environmental health and safety law in South Africa'. He identified some vital issues in construction work, namely that the industry has 1) one of the highest reported work-related injury rates; 2) a wide variety of hazards; and 3) many factors that aggravate the hazards. He gave a broad overview of the related OEHS law but concentrated on the Occupational Health and Safety Act (Act No. 85 of 1993) and its Construction Regulations of 2014. He emphasised the importance of understanding and interpreting the law correctly, to carry out the intentions of the law, i.e. health and safety risk assessments, medical surveillance (testing and certification), reporting of occupational diseases, and submission for compensation. He also focussed on the medical certificate of fitness in the context of the Act and its Construction Regulations.

Dr Reginald Sethakgoe of Life Occupational Health spoke about his experiences with the medical surveillance programme in a South African construction company. He shared key findings from a research study that found that awareness of OEHS is limited, knowledge is informal, and education and training for employers and workers are lacking. He presented the best practices of an OEHS programme in a company in the construction industry.

Ms Anna Fourie from the NIOH spoke about how construction workers are exposed to occupational hazards that cause skin diseases. However, very few cases are reported to authorities or referred to the dermatology clinic at the NIOH. She described a few cases of occupational skin diseases that might be underdiagnosed in the construction industry.

Dr Busisiwe Nyantumbu-Mkhize, also from the NIOH, spoke about the ergonomic challenges that workers in the construction industry face, which increase the risk for developing musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) and hand and arm vibration syndrome (HAVS). She highlighted the need for manufacturers to improve ergonomic equipment and machine design for the African population. In closing, she highlighted that the industry needs to conduct more research on the magnitude of injuries and disease.

Ms Nosimilo Mlangeni from the NIOH spoke on gender, health and safety in the construction industry. In an industry dominated by men, women encounter barriers to entry, have shorter careers, and face gender-based challenges in the workplace, experiencing sexual harassment or hostility from colleagues.

A panel discussion was held on what the World Day of Health and Safety at Work (28 April: SafeDay) and the World Day Against Child Labour (WDAFL) mean to them and their constituencies. The panellists included representatives from the Department of Labour (DoL) (Chief Inspector, Mr Tibor Szana); Business Unity South Africa (BUSA) (Ms Nonhlahlo Mphofu); Black Business Council (BBC) (Mr Itumeleng Moagi); the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (Mr Matthew Grant); the South African Forum of Civil Engineering Contractors (Mr Cobus Coetzee); Master Builders Association North (Ms Michelle Kok); and the University of Cape Town (Mr Ashraf Rykleif). The panel discussion was facilitated by Mr Simphiwe Mabhele from the International Labour Organization (ILO).

The workshop was closed by Dr Muzimkhulu Zungu (NIOH), who read out the 'Resolution on construction industry adopted by the participants in Johannesburg at the 2nd Annual National Institute for Occupational Health Construction Industry Consultative Workshop on 17 May 2018'.

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