

# SASOM 2020 in review: highlights from a challenging year

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Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, The South African Society of Occupational Medicine (SASOM) did not hold its annual congress nor its annual general meeting (AGM) in 2020, and the tenure of SASOM's office bearers and Executive Committee (ExCo) members was extended until the end of 2021. The pandemic also impacted the functioning and activities of the various SASOM chapters, banning non-virtual gatherings and the hosting of continuing professional development (CPD) events. However, the Western Cape Chapter continued to host virtual academic meetings during the reporting period by utilising the SASOM Zoom platform. Instead of the usual AGM, SASOM held a virtual ExCo meeting on 26 November 2020 to ratify the constitutional function of the Society for 2020/2021.

## Activities and outputs

The 2020 annual report (prepared by the SASOM 2020 national secretary, Dr Carmen Whyte) was presented at the virtual ExCo meeting in November 2020, and highlighted the following activities and outputs for the challenging year that was 2020:

- As at 31 October 2020, SASOM had 428 members in good standing, compared to 404 members at the same time in 2019, equating to a 6% escalation in membership from 2019 to 2020. This number includes 78 new members, 16 student members, 10 honorary life members, and three corporate memberships. Honorary life membership was awarded to Prof. David Rees in 2020 in recognition of the invaluable contribution he has made to occupational health and occupational medicine throughout his distinguished career, particularly in terms of teaching, training, and capacity building in southern and South Africa.
- Formal communication with organisations engaged in the enhancement of occupational medicine continued with SASOM ExCo members (co-opted) for the National Institute for Occupational Health (NIOH), the Compensation Commissioner (CC), the International Commission on Occupational Health (ICOH), the South African Society of Travel Medicine (SASTM), and the Mine Medical Professionals Association (MMPA).
- SASOM liaison with other organisations continued at both national and international levels, e.g. the South African Department of Employment and Labour (DoEL), with SASOM being an active participant in, and contributor to, the Occupational Health Forum; *Occupational Health Southern Africa Journal* (OHSJA); the Council for Health Service Accreditation of Southern Africa (COHSASA); the International Occupational Medicine Society Collaborative (IOMSC); and the American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (ACOEM).

- A memorandum of understanding (MoU) was signed between SASOM and the Compensation Fund of the DoEL for mutual benefit of both institutions in terms of research and teaching activities, and raising the profiles of both entities. The MoU was approved by both parties and it is envisaged that it will be finalised and implemented during the new reporting period.
- SASOM commenced with secretarial support to MEDICHEM with effect from March 2020. The MoU between the two parties stipulates secretarial support for the MEDICHEM treasurer and the chair of the ICOH Scientific Committee (SC) on Occupational Health in the Chemical Industry (previously known as ICOH SC MEDICHEM).
- SASOM guidelines are provided free of charge to members as a member benefit. Guidelines are continuously revised to ensure that they remain relevant: 13 guidelines are currently under revision, and two new guidelines are under development, viz. 'Psychiatry in occupational health' and 'Construction employee medical surveillance'.
- OHSJA converted to a fully digital format during 2020. Although the Journal had been working towards a fully virtual format with no print issues, the decision to become fully virtual was hastened by the COVID-19 pandemic. SASOM facilitated the process of the digital publication of the Journal issues on the OHSJA website ([www.occhealth.co.za](http://www.occhealth.co.za)) in terms of controlled access by members of the four occupational health societies in South Africa that share OHSJA as their Official Journal. SASOM will continue to sponsor and host the Zoom platform for the meetings of the OHSJA Editorial Board until further notice; Prof. Daan Kocks (SASOM chair) and Dr Spo Kgalamono (NIOH executive director) represent SASOM on the OHSJA Editorial Board.

The SASOM history article – 'SASOM celebrates a rich legacy of promoting and protecting health in the workplace' – was published in the March/April 2020 issue of the OHSJA. This was a bumper 64-page special issue, highlighting the histories of the occupational health societies. SASOM also contributed as a sponsor to the September/October 2020 special issue of OHSJA, which incorporated a Festschrift for Prof. David Rees.

SASOM's continued contribution to, and support for, OHSJA reiterates the prominent role that the Society plays as the leading authority in maintaining good cooperation between the other Societies and various stakeholders in occupational health and occupational medicine in South Africa.

- SASOM has stepped up its support to members in the era of the ongoing pandemic and, since July 2020, has offered its members seven webinars dedicated to various aspects of COVID-19, aligned

with topics of interest that were requested by its members. The webinars are accredited by the South African Medical Association (SAMA) for CPD points/CEUnits with certificates of attendance being issued to paid-up members. Presentations are available to members on the SASOM website ([www.sasom.org](http://www.sasom.org)). A 2021 CPD programme for SASOM members is under development.

The following peer-reviewed position statements, endorsements, updates, and policies were published on the SASOM website during the reporting period:

- SASOM endorses the South African Thoracic Society (SATS) position statement on the conduct of lung function testing during the coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic (24 Apr 2020)
- SASOM position statement on medical records – COVID-19 pandemic (30 Apr 2020)
- COVID-19 healthcare risk waste (20 May 2020)
- Compensation of Occupational Injuries and Disease Act (COIDA) – COVID-19 occupational disease legal update (3 Aug 2020)
- Occupational medical examinations during the COVID-19 pandemic (16 Sep 2020)
- SASOM position statement on the SATS update of the position statement on pulmonary function testing (19 Oct 2020)
- Occupational health services at an employer: how to budget the time-based professional resources of the occupational medical practitioner (25 Oct 2020)
- Electronic communications of COVID-19-related guidance documents and scientific publications from various sources, including SASOM, the National Department of Health, the DoEL, and the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD), were shared with SASOM members throughout 2020. For the benefit of its members, SASOM will continue to share information and invitations for online events, including webinars and virtual meetings related to COVID-19, organised by both national and international organisations.
- The SASOM Medal of Excellence, Fellowship of the College of Public Health Medicine of South Africa – Division Occupational Medicine: FCPHM(SA)OccMed – was not awarded in 2020.

### The SASOM national office

During 2020, the SASOM national office in Pretoria relocated to new premises in Montana, after being based in Meyerspark for many years. The national office experienced significant growth in activities during the reporting period, also taking into consideration the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic and the associated increased need for information. The following statistics provide an overview of the workload managed in the office, from November 2019 to October 2020:

- 1 317 incoming and 3 487 outgoing e-mail communications
- 203 e-mail communications circulated to SASOM members to share information and invitations for online events related to COVID-19, organised by both national and international organisations
- In addition to normal administrative and member-related issues, 155 enquiries linked to occupational medicine and occupational

health practices were handled. These enquiries require expert opinions from members of SASOM before responses are directed to senders. The positive feedback received from recipients confirmed the ever-increasing high level of knowledge and expertise of SASOM members

- The SASOM website remains interactive and is continuously updated. New features are added, based on modern trends and requests/comments from members. The following statistics, which demonstrate the increased traffic on the SASOM website, are testament to the fact that it provides a useful platform for sharing information to members and the public (comparing Jan–Oct 2019 with Jan–Oct 2020):
  - unique visitors: 24 890 (235% escalation)
  - number of visits: 36 693 (197% escalation)
  - pages: 141 514 (145% escalation)



**Throwback to the SASOM-MEDICHEM Joint Congress 2019 – artistic licence – Jaco Botha, project coordinator in the SASOM national office (far right) shares drumming tips with the members of ‘Drum Sound Circles’ who provided the entertainment at the gala dinner**

*Photograph: Laria Botha*

### Farewell and good luck wishes

Jaco Botha, the project coordinator in the SASOM national office, resigned at the end of February 2021; he will be relocating to New Zealand at the end of March 2021. The SASOM chair and members take this opportunity to heartily thank Jaco for his dedication and commitment to SASOM over the past three years, and for his cordiality, enthusiasm, diplomacy and efficiency in engaging with members and dealing with their queries, and managing the day-to-day tasks of the national office. Jaco, you will be sorely missed but we wish you all the best for your new life and fresh ventures, both personally and professionally, in the ‘land of the long white cloud’. Take care, travel safely, and please stay in touch!