



# From the Editor . . .



**Gill Nelson,  
Editor-in-chief**

This time last year, we were all blissfully unaware that we were only a few weeks away from real-life science fiction. In the past, only 'doctors' wore masks (sometimes) but shweshwe and Liberty print<sup>1</sup> cloth masks have morphed from PPE to fashion items, for sale in boutiques, the corner shop and on street corners. While we expected increases in sin taxes in 2020, the banning of cigarettes and alcohol was a shock, and having to watch the waves from afar rather than wade in the water put a dampener on our summer holidays. But the science fiction turned into horror as the economy collapsed, together with friends, colleagues and family members – many of whom died. Others entered into self-imposed isolation, and some remain there still. In December 2020, the statistician-general, Risenga Maluleke, described the COVID-19 pandemic as “the biggest disruptor to our lives ever since the Second World War”.<sup>2</sup>

We are justifiably fearful and uncertain of the future, not knowing if South Africa will get an effective vaccine any time soon, or if life will ever return to normal. However, the mining industry is geared up for the vaccine roll-out, as reported by Thuthula Balfour on page 32. Please register for the webinar on this topic to find out more.

While COVID-19 has taken world centre stage, we must not forget that there are other issues that need our attention. Focus on the pandemic has resulted in neglect of prevention and treatment of other diseases, such as HIV, tuberculosis and many noncommunicable diseases that affect workers in South Africa;<sup>3-5</sup> as well as mental health.

Of course, mental health was on the occupational health agenda for a long time prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. In this issue, Nonhlanhla Tlotleng and colleagues from the National Institute for Occupational Health write about their study on common mental health disorders (CMDs) in caddies and other golf course workers, concluding that intimidation at work and alcohol use were associated with CMDs in their study population. Many of the study participants also earned below the minimum wage.

In addition to COVID-19, politics continues to dominate South Africa's headlines. One example is the Free State asbestos corruption scandal, which has focused on the fraud of R255 million,<sup>6</sup> while neglecting the issue of the health effects of exposure to asbestos fibres from the removal or repair of asbestos cement roofs. *Occupational Health Southern Africa* has published three research papers on this topic in the past.<sup>7-9</sup> In this issue of the Journal, Brian

Gibson and colleagues provide an objective opinion about the related health risks, based on scientific evidence.

Continuing our theme of compensation from the previous two issues of *Occupational Health Southern Africa*, Tim Hughes from the Injured Workers' Action Group (IWAG) has drawn our attention, in a second opinion piece, to the deadline to comment on the Compensation for Occupational Injuries and Diseases Act (COIDA) Amendment Bill by 19 February. If you are interested, please read the amendment at [https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis\\_document/202008/43658rg11165gon930s.pdf](https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/202008/43658rg11165gon930s.pdf). There are not many days left to submit your comments.

Also related to legislation, please note that, following the promulgation of the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA) No 4 of 2013, which came into force on 1 July 2020, the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) is facilitating the process of developing a Code of Conduct for Research to “ensure certainty, transparency, and clarity in the processing of personal information for research purposes”. Please visit <https://saspp.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Announcement-of-the-POPIA-CoC.pdf> for more information.

Finally, I am very pleased to let you know that Prof. Daan Kocks, SASOM president, is in good health after his hospitalisation with COVID-19 last year, as shared in my editorial of Sep/Oct 2020. Please stay safe and protect yourselves by wearing your masks and limiting your physical interactions with others. Let's hope that the vaccine will be available soon, for all. The world is indeed an overwhelming place in 2021.

## REFERENCES

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### DID YOU KNOW?

SASOM members can earn 18 of the 60 CPD points required annually by correctly answering 70% of the 12 questions that are based on the scientific and other papers published in each issue of *Occupational Health Southern Africa*.

Please go to the Events page <http://www.occhealth.co.za/?/events> for more information about the EPICOH conference in September this year, and the ICOH conference in Melbourne in October 2022.

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We are grateful to our reviewers for their evaluation and guidance on manuscripts submitted to the Journal.

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