



From the Editor . . .



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

On 23 March last year, President Ramaphosa announced that we would need to stay at home for three weeks to contain the spread of SARS-CoV-2. A year later, the world, our country and our lives have changed drastically, with no sign of ever returning to what we once considered to be normal. We have experienced five levels of lockdown and devastating effects on the economy – especially small businesses; some have lost loved ones and/or incomes. But the vaccine is now in South Africa, with

more doses on the way, and there is hope that we may yet beat this virus.

Rightfully, healthcare workers are first in line to receive the vaccine. Fortuitously, Kayla Liedemann and Angela Dramowski from Stellenbosch University describe their study, in this issue of *Occupational Health Southern Africa*, on vaccination knowledge, attitudes and practices of a group of healthcare workers at Tygerberg Hospital. While the study was conducted before anyone had heard of SARS-CoV-2, it is likely that healthcare workers feel the same about the current vaccine – and that the same barriers and facilitators described in this study apply to the COVID-19 vaccine.

It might come as a surprise to some that not all healthcare workers are enthusiastic about receiving vaccines (although one hopes that attitudes to the COVID-19 vaccine are more positive), but perhaps we should not be surprised, given the large amount of fake news spread about the vaccine, by disbelievers and anti-vaxxers. These include claims about gene therapy and microchip implants,¹ which followed hot on the heels of myths about the virus itself, such as the immunity-imbibing effects of drinking alcohol, the benefits of sun exposure in preventing the spread of COVID-19, the spread of the virus via 5G cellular networks, and many more.²

Many questions about COVID-19 and the vaccine remain, and many new ones will be raised with time. What we know currently, however, is that there are very few contraindications to vaccination, and that being vaccinated very likely reduces COVID-19 morbidity and mortality, and transmission of the virus.³

What is not fake news, is that exercise is important in these stressful times, for our physical and mental health. For a while last year, outdoor exercise was banned, and soon a whole new world of online gym classes began, including yoga, Pilates and many more.

But many occupations are, in themselves, physically demanding, and sometimes equivalent to a day spent in the gym in days gone by. While occupations such as mining and construction work obviously involve intense physical activity, others might not be perceived as requiring much energy expenditure. However, even walking can be physically exerting over many hours in a single day. Gillian Lamcraft, Gina Joubert and their students from the University of the Free State present their findings from a study on the number of steps walked by medical registrars from different departments. The range of steps varied widely in this small study but some registrars walked almost 15 000 steps in a single day.

The world is hungry for answers, and researchers are eager to provide them, with or without conducting rigorous studies. Consequently, it is estimated that up to 30% of the approximately 30 000 COVID-19 research papers published in 2020 were preprints.⁴ This practice is not without its obvious pitfalls. Retraction Watch, which operates under the Center for Scientific Integrity, and has been reporting on retractions of scientific papers and related topics since 2010 (www.retractionwatch.com), had more than 100 papers on COVID-19 listed as having been retracted at the time of writing this editorial;⁵ including a paper that argued that 5G technology could lead to SARS-CoV-2 infection!⁶

While such research misconduct is reprehensible to most of us, an even more serious practice has been exposed: some researchers have been using “paper mills” to boost their academic careers. This systematic production of falsified research has been investigated by research integrity sleuths, and a report, explaining the practice, was published in *Nature* last month.⁷ I encourage those of you who are interested in the topic of research integrity to consider attending the 7th World Congress on Research Integrity in Cape Town next year, and registering for the free pre-congress virtual event next month (see opposite page for details).

Since occupationally acquired COVID-19 was added to the list of occupational diseases under the COID Act (Act No. 30 of 1993)⁸ the role of occupational health services has been more in the spotlight than ever. Dr Dingani Moyo from Zimbabwe provides an overview of the current sorry state of occupational health and medical services and training in southern Africa. I hope that his commentary will spark interest and generate some responses from readers who might have suggestions for boosting occupational health training and services throughout the region.

SASOM members, remember that you can earn CPD points for reading the papers published in this issue and completing the questionnaire. In addition, anyone who reviews (or has reviewed) a paper for *Occupational Health Southern Africa* can apply for three CPD points. If

you have occupational health research experience and have published at least five papers in your field of expertise, please consider becoming a reviewer; send your details to me at gill.nelson@wits.ac.za, and I will add your name to our database.

On the topic of CPD points, we will be starting our scientific manuscript writing workshops soon. Sessions are planned for May, July, September and November. Please contact your Societies for more information and application forms. Non-members are also welcome, and can contact me for more information at the e-mail address above. Certificates of attendance will be provided to all those who participate. The workshops have been accredited with the HPCSA for 14 CPD points.



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The 7th World Congress on Research Integrity will take place in Cape Town, South Africa, next year (29 May to 1 June 2022) but this year, there will be a free pre-congress virtual event taking place online from 30 May to 2 June 2021. The theme is 'Growing

the global research integrity community through focused, diverse and engaging webinar discussions'. Please register at <https://wcri2022.org/digital-event-2021/> if you are interested in attending this event.