

ICOH history webinar: reconsidering the politics of occupational health in a world without industrial work

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The International Commission on Occupational Health (ICOH) Scientific Committee on History of Prevention of Occupational and Environmental Diseases had intended to host the 7th International Conference in Durban in May 2020. No-one predicted the COVID-19 pandemic, but the Committee undertook to arrange a webinar, based on the original conference theme: *Occupational and Environmental Health: at the crossroads of migrations, empires and social movements*.

Summary of the proceedings

The webinar was held on 23 February, jointly organised by the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), South Africa, and the ICOH Committee. Paul Blanc of the University of California, San Francisco, USA, and Kjell Torén of the University of Gothenburg, Sweden; chair and secretary of the Scientific Committee, respectively. The webinar was chaired by Rajen Naidoo of UKZN and attracted more than 250 participants from more than 50 countries, globally. The keynote presentation was given by Keith Breckenridge of the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (WISER), South Africa. He was joined on the panel by Rodney Ehrlich from the University of Cape Town (UCT), South Africa, Rene Loewenson from Zimbabwe, and Paul-Andre Rosental from Sciences Po and the *Institute National d'Etudes Démographiques* in Paris.

Keith Breckenridge's keynote address, 'Reconsidering the politics of occupational health in a world without industrial work', focused on the development of the mining industry in South Africa, and the parallel development of the South African economy, with particular emphasis on the history of occupational diseases in that industry, and how health services grew in order to address the rise in poor health of

workers. Although South Africa became a leader in the global metals economy, disease amongst workers was rampant. This legacy continues today, with occupational tuberculosis and pneumoconiosis being major problems in all the labour-sending areas of southern Africa – problems that are now having to be addressed by the public health system, as workers leave the mining industry. This externalisation of costs of health and services has forced stakeholders to seek redemption through legal recourse. This has led to the establishment of various trusts of which workers, their families and communities become beneficiaries. Panelists explored these themes in the subsequent discussions, particularly those of ex-miners and health – “hidden in plain sight” – or affected communities on the periphery of these mining towns, who do not benefit from the new trusts, as emphasised by Rene Loewenson.

Future conference/webinars

At the business meeting of the Scientific Committee that followed, consensus was reached that the postponed Durban conference will be convened in May 2024, depending, of course, on the state of global health. The Committee also agreed to host an annual webinar, based on the evidence of the success of this inaugural webinar. The next webinar is scheduled to be hosted by our colleagues in France in January or February 2022.

The webinar is available here

YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M4WNYDwE7TE>