

Well done to our occupational health professionals working tirelessly in workplace vaccination programmes

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As a proud backliner in the COVID-19 pandemic, I joined our frontliners in the mines of the Northern Cape and Limpopo provinces in August 2021 to witness workplace vaccination programmes in action... all in support of the Government-led vaccination programmes.

I was not prepared for what lay before me. Over the last 18 months, occupational health centres have either transformed into, or provided, the solid foundation for COVID-19 initiatives – from screening and testing to vaccination centres. Armed with counselling stations, emergency equipment, on-site laboratories, vaccination 'Ubers', and electronic and paper systems, driven by genuine, tenacious people, previously unemployed youth, occupational health professionals and clinical associates with robust communication and engagement plans are all contributing to the success of the workplace vaccination rollouts.

The energy from the leadership on the ground was palpable. From dispelling myths about vaccines to creating a sense of 'Ubuntu', it was nostalgic.

I clearly remember the days of the HIV/TB struggles when our commitment (and our sense of hopelessness) was, regrettably, not always matched with the requisite leadership and political will. It has taken us decades, and a pandemic, to arrive at this point in the history of occupational health in South Africa – to enjoy seeing health at the top of leadership's agenda at last, and to enjoy the multidisciplinary collaborations and the tripartite partnerships despite our utter exhaustion and grief over all our losses.

Let us not lose this momentum. Let us continue to drive the health agendas – the wellness of our women in workplaces, eradicating TB, silicosis and HIV – and to address non-communicable diseases and mental health conditions; all of which need enthusiastic financial and non-financial investments as we navigate our new reality.

A big shout-out to our occupational health professionals, from the backlines to the frontlines, who continue to serve selflessly. You are true superheroes!