Facts about Occupational Health in South Africa

The National Institute for Occupational Health
The National Institute for Occupational Health (NIOH), a division of the National Health Laboratory Service (NHLS), is the reference centre for occupational health in South Africa. The Institute is committed to improving occupational health through training, service and research – and to supporting the development of occupational health services in southern Africa. The NIOH is known for its multidisciplinary occupational health research, advice and assistance, capacity building, outreach through teaching and training, and service delivery. Through its specialised laboratories supporting chemical analysis, toxicology, pathology, immunology and microbiology, occupational medicine and occupational hygiene, the NIOH has the capacity to investigate occupational diseases and to promote good occupational health practice in the national workforce. With its numerous national and international affiliations and collaborations, the NIOH is well positioned to contribute to the development of occupational health capacity and the sustainability of technical and academic outreach to improve workers’ health.

• Why is OHS important?
Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) is health and safety in all workplaces. OHS is important because it keeps the working population (in SA, approximately 12 million) healthy and safe – and there is a positive relationship between good OHS and the creation and maintenance of sustainable and high productivity, as well as economic development. In addition, some sectors are considered to be high risk – e.g. mining, construction, fishing, agriculture and healthcare – and these sectors especially have a legislative imperative to implement suitable OHS programmes in their workplaces. OHS programmes implemented properly contribute positively to the prevention of occupational diseases and injuries. Prevention is far preferable to treatment, as often there is no treatment for occupational diseases and injuries.

• Does it apply to all environments?
OHS applies to all work environments, and every workplace (even those considered to be low risk) should implement an OHS programme, even if very basic. There needs to be buy-in and active participation from employers, supervisors and managers, trade unions and workers for an OHS programme to be implemented successfully.

• Approximately how many people work in OHS currently in SA?
About 1000 health professionals work in Occupational Health directly – the bulk of whom are Occupational Health Nurses.

• Is there a demand for OHS qualified people?
There is an increasing demand for OHS qualified people. Occupational health practitioners have varied backgrounds, training and expertise. The overall discipline of occupational health is based on three pillars working in synergy – occupational medicine, industrial hygiene, and occupational safety. Each pillar has its own experts in various fields – occupational medicine specialists, public or community health specialists, occupational / industrial hygienists, engineers, safety experts, medical scientists, chemists, technologists, technicians, toxicologists, etc. Increasingly, the environmental aspect is becoming part and parcel of OHS – SHE (Safety, Health, Environment) – and SHE officers have become important members of the OHS team.

The scope of OHS has broadened from the diseases or injuries attributable to work, to the nature of the work itself, the wider work environment and the workers’ wellbeing. Specialities which have become part of the wider OHS field are related to particular problems and applications within physiology, psychology and work organisation, sociology, ergonomics, medicine, hygiene, work safety, toxicology, and epidemiology, amongst others.

• How does one enter the field?
People wanting to enter the field should have qualifications in the sciences or in medicine, and there is scope and opportunity for obtaining postgraduate qualifications which are specific to the occupational health field, like the Diploma in Occupational Health (DOH) and the Masters in Public Health (MPH), with a special focus on industrial hygiene; these postgraduate courses are offered at SA universities. A number of universities also offer undergraduate courses related to occupational health – e.g. diploma in environmental health.

• OHS is suitable for what kind of person?
OHS is suitable for people with enquiring minds who have an interest and passion for improving conditions in workplace environments. OHS programmes are informed by research and service delivery, and an important component of OHS as a profession is teaching and training of professionals, as well as employers, managers and supervisors, workers and workers’ representatives.

• What kind of OHS training is offered by the NIOH?
The NIOH offers two formal postgraduate qualifications in occupational health – the DOH and the MPH, in collaboration with the University of the Witwatersrand. The NIOH also provides ad hoc and informal training, as per requests, to various entities – e.g. enterprises in the private sector and government departments.

• The biggest concern/s in OHS at present?
It is difficult for workplaces to successfully establish and implement OHS programmes for various reasons (financial constraints, lack of will or buy-in from stakeholders, poor infrastructure). There is specific legislation which governs OHS in South Africa e.g. the Occupational Health and Safety Act of 1993; the Hazardous Chemical Substances Act; the Lead Regulations; the Asbestos Regulations; the Compensation for Occupational Injuries and Diseases Act; acts relating to the Environment, etc. The mining industry is a very specific sector with its own legislation – e.g. the Mine Health and Safety Act of 1997 and the subsequent Mine Health and Safety Amendment Act of 1997; the Occupational Diseases and Mines and Works Act of 1973, etc. These interventions arising out of legislation need to be monitored and approved, authorities are required to check that the legislation is implemented – this does not happen for various reasons e.g. lack of qualified OHS personnel and adequate resources, etc.

• What are the prospects for OHS professionals?
The field is growing as workers increasingly become aware of their right to a safe and healthy workplace.

• Final comments
It is important to include a component of workplace health services dedicated to HIV/AIDS and TB in the workplace as part of a comprehensive OHS programme. The burden of HIV/AIDS and TB in SA is very high and workplace interventions are an absolute necessity.