While the theme of the SASOM Annual Congress in July 2012 was keeping up to date with new medical information, it was good to see where we have come from. Two presenters brilliantly highlighted medical history and proceeded to expose unknown factors for the future.

A clinical virologist, Prof. Lynne Webber linked three viral pandemics, known as the Spanish influenza (presumed to be caused by the H1N1 virus) in 1918, the Asian influenza (H2N2 virus) in 1957-58 and the Hong Kong influenza (H3N2 virus) in 1968-69. She discussed the re-emergence of Human Avian influenza and the unknown determinants of the pathogenic potential of influenza viruses.

Prof. Malcolm Sim of the Monash University in Australia compared the challenges of identifying diseases faced by Bernardino Ramazzini at the end of the seventeenth century with those of occupational diseases experienced in modern times. He gave an overview of the challenges experienced with electromagnetic hypersensitivity syndrome and of engineered nanoparticles which are difficult to measure and regulate.

Prof. Sim also discussed the re-emergence of noise-induced hearing loss in Australia. The delegates took note of the Cochrane review which revealed little evidence that legislation does reduce noise levels in workplaces, that hearing protection devices are effective, and the contradictory evidence that these devices are effective in the long term.

The dynamic C3/6 quadriplegic, Mr Martin Brown, impressed everyone with his presentation on overcoming physical obstacles and facing the world. Prof. Helgard Meyer explained the general principles of managing chronic pain which could also be applied in the workplace. The title, ‘This funny feeling’ is an expression used by patients, which could disguise the serious medical conditions such as ischaemic heart disease and atherosclerosis, that Prof. James Ker described in fine detail.

Prof. Heine van der Walt put a new slant on obesity, the effects on an obese person’s health and work performance and described effective management thereof. Another interesting presentation, called ‘Sex and sexuality in the workplace’ by Dr Etienne Kok revealed interesting facts that affect some workers and their productivity.

More in line with occupational health, Dr Frank Fox expertly explained the management of occupational health care in a global mining company. Ms Claudina Nogueira reported on global issues that have emerged after the ICOH 2012 Congress and the ‘Cancun Charter on Occupational Health’. Climate change and solar radiation are two factors that were emphasised.

On the second day of the Congress Ms Hanlie van Vuuren gave excellent insight into the legal right to work, employment security for people with disabilities and the issue of equality versus discrimination from legal and inherent job requirement perspectives.

Ms Elsabe Engelbrecht reminded the delegates that these are stressful times for workers and of the importance of wellness programmes. She explained the legal requirement to identify a stressed worker and to intervene. On a similar note, psychologist Dr Hermann Liebenberg guided the delegates through the importance of psychological rehabilitation after serious injury or illness, which will no doubt assist the worker to return to work earlier.

Considering that there are more than 250 000 chemicals used in industrial and domestic settings in the world, it was good to be reminded of the correct approach to monitoring hazardous chemical substances by Dr Graham Chin. On the other hand, Ms Rina van der Gryp reminded the delegates that there are 31 communicable diseases that must be reported to local authorities when diagnosed. She highlighted new developments in meningococcal infections, cholera and typhoid, which are prevalent in Africa.

Dr Andre van Jaarsveld is a consultant on fatigue management, an aspect that has been neglected in the workplace and is important especially for shift workers. He described the impact of fatigue on health, work and performance and advocated lifestyle changes to overcome fatigue.

SASOM thanks the presenters for sharing their expertise and for their time and effort. The delegates, who were liberal in their praise of the congress, are thanked for attending.

The next SASOM conference will coincide with the SASOM Annual General Meeting at the Bundu Lodge near White River in Mpumalanga. Entitled Law, Ethics and Bundu Bashing we have exciting presentations lined up.

Report by Jenny Acutt in the SASOM National Office, e-mail: info@sasom.org