South African Society of Occupational Health Nursing (SASOHN) – Celebrating 35 years

Occupational health (OH) has developed over the years and the importance of occupational health nursing (OHN) has received global recognition. Despite challenges facing OHN, the South African Society of Occupational Health Nursing (SASOHN) continues to work tirelessly towards the development of the profession, making inroads into various government departments and higher education institutions in order to keep abreast of, and to contribute to, changes in legislation, and to promote high standards of training.

Over the last 35 years, SASOHN has developed from a discussion group of industrial nurses to the vibrant organisation it is today. With the limited space available, I will endeavour to convey significant historical information. Assistance with writing this article was received from the more experienced members of SASOHN who have laid the stepping stones for the younger generation.

So, how did SASOHN start? On 20 April 1966 the industrial nurses of the then Southern Transvaal met, as a group, to hold the first ‘meeting’ which was arranged by Mary E Ahlers who worked for the United Tobacco Company Ltd. In 1968 money was raised for Dorothy Blacklaws to attend an Industrial Nursing Conference in Montreal, Canada, and OHNs have been attending international events annually ever since.

The first industrial nurses discussion group, which the members named ‘Occupational Health Nurses Discussion Group (Southern Transvaal)’, was held on 11 April 1970. The founding members were ME Ahlers, D Cas, CA Robertson, M Dixon, AM Coetzee, MG Meeker, E Smith, A Shacklock and D Blacklaws. At this stage, members were not employed only in industry but also in department stores, transportation and other sectors. The year following this inaugural meeting, similar groups were formed in Natal and Cape Town. The Port Natal Discussion Group, based in Durban, held two meetings a year in Pietermaritzburg to facilitate attendance by nurses from this area. In 1975, at the May meeting, it was decided that the Eastern Cape Region would approach other regional groups to form a national society.

In 1976 members became involved in accommodating nursing students from basic nursing courses and post basic OH speciality courses for clinical experience in their clinics. It was in this year that the term “industrial nurses” was changed to “occupational health nurses” in line with international standards. It was around this time that members started to raise concerns about their need for indemnity cover, and the time when OHN education and audiometry training were recognised.

On 2 June 1976, 22 nurses enrolled for the first Certificate in OHN course run by Professor Ian Webster at the National Centre for Occupational Health (NCOH). D Blacklaws was the first nurse to complete the certificate in OHN in Johannesburg. The first university to facilitate an OHN Certificate course was run in 1977 at the University of Port Elizabeth. On 3 April 1979 Stella Coetzee initiated a course using the boardroom of the South African Nursing Association (SANA) in Pretoria for lectures. In July 1981 the South African Nursing Council (SANC) approved the opening of a school in the Northern Transvaal, called the Pretoria School for OH, and the first intake of students was in September 1981. On 7 October 1981 the SANC recognised the additional qualification in OHN for Registered Nurses. 1984 saw discussions being held with Professor Kotze at the University of Port Elizabeth about the possibility of a diploma course in OHN. However, as a result of discussions between the Rector, H Snyman and Jenny Serfontein, courses were offered at the Port Elizabeth Technikon from 1990.

In 1996 a new nursing regulation (R212) was gazetted for advanced nursing, and OHN was one of the 16 nursing specialisations included. This was a period of significant change for OHN training as the advanced scope of practice in nursing specialisations was being recognised. The R212 qualification meant that new OHN training programmes were curriculated and the level of training raised to a diploma and, in some institutions, to a Bachelor of Technology degree. The first Bachelor of Technology Nursing (OHN) graduates qualified in 1996. Prior to this, the specialisation in OHN was at a certificate level. In 1996 the title of OHN Practitioner (OHNP) was adopted for all nurses with an additional qualification in OHN.

1980 brought discussions between members from different regions, regarding the formation of a national society. The national society was to monitor the needs of OH nurses and to promote OH in industries. Topics raised included the naming of the society, the drawing up of a constitution, and rules for qualifying for membership. It
was agreed that all regional societies were to have direct responsibility to a national body and not belong to the South African Nursing Association (SANA), a decision that SANA sanctioned. SASOHN was founded on 30 April 1980 through the efforts of E Snyman and Stella Coetzee who recognised a need to promote OHN in South Africa.

Stella was elected as the first SASOHN President. To ensure the infusion of new blood and ideas, each president may serve a maximum of four years and is nominated by and voted for by the membership. See Table 1 for the past and current SASOHN presidents. On 9 July 1981 the society’s first AGM was held in Pretoria, and in 1983 all discussion groups changed their names to Professional Societies of SASOHN.

In 1981 Dorothy Blacklaws was elected onto the executive committee of the Association of Societies for Occupational Safety and Health (ASOSH) to represent OHN. At this point, a salary guideline was drawn up for OH nurses and it was found that salaries in the Eastern Cape were much lower than other regions.

On 5 March 1982 a SASOHN badge was designed by Enid Chanquian who, in recognition, received the first badge. All nurses who completed the certificate course in OHN were awarded the badge. A Presidential chain was donated on 11 June 1982 by South African Druggists and Lennon Companies and was worn by all presidents until 2005. SASOHN celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2005 and a competition for a new Presidential chain was launched. The winning design, based on its symbolism, was submitted by Angie Butkovik (West Rand). The new Presidential chain of office was worn for the first time at the 2005 AGM and continues to be worn by the SASOHN President.

Z van Loggerenberg was sponsored to attend the International Commission on Occupational Health (ICOH) conference in 1984 and the Stellenbosch Farmers Wineries (SFW) donated a floating trophy for an achievement in OHN in the same year. On 25 November 1983 the first copies of An Introduction to Occupational Health Nursing in South Africa, written by Dr Mike Baker and Stella Coetzee, were published. In 1983 Professor Ian Webster established the Gold Medal award for the best OHN student in southern Africa; the first medal was awarded to Susan Bothma on 15 June 1984. The Ian Webster silver and gold medals continue to be awarded: the silver medal to the student who obtains the top marks in a Bachelor of Technology OHN course and the gold medal to any SASOHN member who completes a masters or doctoral degree in the field of OH. 1988 saw Janet Taylor donating the Janet Taylor Award for the Best Student, which continues to be awarded to the top student in South Africa in a Diploma in OHN course.

### Table 1. SASOHN Presidents 1980 - 2015

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>President</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1980 - 1984</td>
<td>Stella Coetzee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985 – 1988</td>
<td>Yvonne Campbell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989 - 1990</td>
<td>Ann Acutt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995 - 1998</td>
<td>Penny Mead</td>
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<tr>
<td>1999 - 2002</td>
<td>Louwna Pretorius</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003 - 2006</td>
<td>Karen Michell</td>
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<tr>
<td>2007 - 2010</td>
<td>Sonja Kruger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011 - 2012</td>
<td>Karen Michell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013 to date</td>
<td>Kim Davies</td>
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</tbody>
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1984 saw all of Port Natal Regional records destroyed during floods. In 1985 the SASOHN constitution was amended, adding the associate member category. P Harvey was elected a delegate to the ICOH in Scotland in 1986 and the inaugural meeting of Northern Natal was held in July of the same year. The Baker/Coetzee Bursary Fund was established in 1986 to support professional nurses studying towards an OHN specialist qualification. SASOHN awards Honorary Life Memberships to any members who have served with distinction in any field of OHN. Many awards have been made over the last 35 years.

In 1988 SASOHN West Rand sent a request to establish a branch and held its inaugural meeting on 25 January 1989. This inaugural meeting was attended by Yvonne Campbell, the then president of SASOHN. In March 1991 Jenny Serfontein and Brenda Webster attended the PAN African Congress in Lusaka, Zambia, where Jenny presented a paper. In 1992 C. Shumane was awarded the Stellenbosch Farmers Winery Trophy for outstanding achievement in OH.

In 1993 Jenny Serfontein was nominated to serve on the Scientific Committee for Occupational Health Nursing (SCOHN), a sub-committee of ICOH. She was the first South African nurse to serve on this committee. In 2005 Louwna Pretorius joined SCOHN as secretary, and became the Vice Chairperson of SCOHN in 2006. At the same time, Jenny Serfontein was nominated and elected as an ICOH Board member and went on to receive Emeritus Membership of ICOH in 2012. SASOHN hosted the SCOHN 2009 Pre-Conference Workshop in Cape Town as part of the ICOH congress.

The first Exhibition of Occupational Health, organised by J Botha, was held in 1994 at the Feather Market Hall in Port Elizabeth and was a huge success. Jenny Serfontein was invited by the Minister of Health to serve on the council for the Occupational Health and Safety Act. 1995 saw the first edition of the Occupational Health Southern Africa journal published. Port Natal, in liaison with SASOM,
hosted the Pan African Congress on Occupational Health in Durban in 1997, with Minister Tito Mboweni, the then Minister of Labour, opening the congress.

Professional indemnity insurance for OHN commenced in 2000 through the efforts of Penny Mead (SASOHN President 1996–1999) with all paid-up SASOHN members being covered. On 7 March 2001 SASOHN was awarded custodianship of the Audiometry database by the Department of Labour. This was done in response to the Department of Labour’s outsourcing of non-key functions.

A Yahoo discussion group for OHNPs was launched in 2002 by Claire Deacon and continues to be an excellent source of information regarding occupational health topics from fellow OHNPs around the country. In this year SASOHN introduced the OHNP of the Year Award which was won by Jane Philipou from Port Natal. A website was developed (www.sasohn.co.za) where information is available covering the 10 regions, legislation, and important happenings – an important communication tool for SASOHN members. The SASOHN National Office was established in 2003 to cope with the volume of work generated by the ever-increasing membership. It operates for two hours a day and has grown to a half-day position due to the volume of work. The best journal article by an OHNP published in the Occupational Health Southern Africa journal was launched in 2003 and, in the same year, Louwna Pretorius was elected onto the board of the 2nd democratic council of the South African Nursing Council, the first OHN to achieve this.

1983 saw the compilation of a basic medicine list under the permit system and, in 1984, all OH clinics were required to register with the Department of Health and obtain a permit to facilitate the purchase of medicines for the clinics. Things developed and, in May 2004, it became a requirement for any healthcare professional issuing medication to complete a dispensing course and to be registered and licensed with the Department of Health. SASOHN members formed a significant group needing to meet these requirements.

SASOHN was instrumental in the initiation and eventual publication, in November 2008, of SANS 451, a national standard (SANS 451-1) for spirometry testing in the office environment.

In 2010 the SASOHN logo was registered as a trademark through the dedication of Sonja Kruger. Various documents compiled by Sonja Kruger filled the gap on student experiential training requirements, requirements for legal compliance in the occupational health setting and the first SASOHN position paper on medical fitness to work. Various educational landmarks were achieved during this time, including Louwna Pretorius and Wendy Lewis representing SASOHN at the various standards generating bodies (SGB) for Nursing and Occupational Health and Safety qualifications.

Karen Michell represented SASOHN at the First Global Summit on OHN held in Atlanta, USA, in 2011. The revised SASOHN book, edited by Karen Michell, was launched at the Gala Dinner on 3 November 2012. Linda Grainger and Louwna Pretorius were founder fellows of the Academy of Nursing in South Africa (ANSA) in 2013 and the first OHNPs to be inducted. SASOHN now has four fellows in the Academy: – Louwna Pretorius (2013), Linda Grainger (2013), Penny Orton (2014) and Karen Michell (2015).

SASOHN organised an auditors’ training course for members in 2013 and a number of members from various regions attended. The rationale for the training was to support and improve the quality of the auditing of OHNPs who are entering the OHNP of the Year Award. This award is awarded to both an individual OHNP and a corporate OHNP.

In 2015 the website engine was changed to encourage members to be more interactive with technology and to update their personal details online. At the 2015 ICOH conference in Korea, Louwna Pretorius received a Service award for the Chair of the Scientific Committee from 2009–2015. Kim Davies was elected Secretary of the SCOHN committee, and Angie Butkovic won 2nd prize in the student poster competition for her topic ‘Quality in Industrial Audiometric Screening Refined’. Karen Michell was awarded the Yukkiko award from SCOHN for the best oral/paper abstract submitted to the SCOHN session.

SASOHN continues to grow and currently has a membership of approximately 3 000 members throughout South Africa, with a few international members. Each region holds monthly meetings and annual workshops to convey relevant OH information to its members. SASOHN is a not for profit organisation and funds generated go back to members in the form of sponsorships to conferences and workshops, and for educational bursaries.

As an OHN practitioner there are exciting prospects for our growing profession. There are constant changes and we need to grow to meet the challenges of our industries and the world. By standing together to improve the quality of OHN we can make a huge impact as did the ‘Industrial’ nurses before us

I would like to thank long-standing members of SASOHN for their help in compiling this chronological report of some of the highlights in SASOHN’s 35-year history, not least of all Louwna Pretorius, Karen Michell, Dorothy Blacklaws and Jenny Serfontein.

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