

From the Editor . . .



Linda Grainger,
Editor

Having to write the editorial for the last issue of 2009 has obviously caused me to reflect on the events of the past year. My conclusion is that it has been a challenging and yet productive one with regard to occupational health in our region. Four examples are presented to support this conclusion. Firstly, ICOH2009 took place in March, bringing with it wonderful opportunities to learn from leading experts in the field and to network with colleagues who share our commitment and passion for occupational health. For those who could not attend, we were able to give you some of the benefit in the form of the special ICOH2009 issue.

Secondly, rather sadly, the Work and Health in Southern Africa Programme came to a close. Although many of our members from the academic institutions and the National Institute for Occupational Health (NIOH) were involved, it is likely that the majority of our readership were unaware of this project. So, in order to showcase its achievements and hopefully through this raised awareness to spur others to find ways to continue to build on these, we are delighted to be able to give all our readers a special issue on the project (packaged with this November/December 2009 issue). It will be a useful source of information on the state of occupational health in the region, and possibly facilitate contact and further projects with colleagues from our neighbouring countries. The programme also highlights that South Africa is an integral part of the Southern African Development Community, and we will not be successful in promoting occupational health in isolation from the other member countries. Many of our workers come from these countries, and this has both positive and negative results. Some return with adverse health effects, thereby shifting the burden for their care onto their home countries. However, many are able to access the basic commodities needed for health as a result of their earnings, and frequently support multiple family members back home. Many are employed in safe and healthy workplaces. OH is far more developed here, and there is the potential to positively influence its development in other countries.

Thirdly, in preparing a paper to present at the Ian Webster Memorial Day at the NIOH on 18 November, 2009, I considered the current trends and factors influencing occupational health nursing in South Africa. Significant on a global level are globalisation, climate change, the financial crisis, changing demographics, challenges to health systems and new technologies and processes. Their effects on health in relation to work include the marked growth in informal, part time and contract work and unemployment, exposure to traditional and new work hazards and the shrinkage of OH&S coverage. At present, the majority of the services are located in the private sector. Although there are encouraging

signs that some public sector organisations are beginning to provide OH&S services, it is time that such services became a co-ordinated and effective component of the national health system as a whole, providing access to all workers. It is clear that as members of the multidisciplinary OH team, we need to unite and strategise on how to broaden the coverage, and in so doing we may be able to change the threat to OH services as a result of financial constraints into an opportunity!

Two of the three papers in this issue, pick up the theme of occupational health risks to informal workers. Firstly, Naidoo, Kessy and Mlingi report the findings of their study into the prevalence of dust-related respiratory problems and relationships between health endpoints and respirable dust among stonecrushers in an informal sector quarry in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania. The first systematic study of its kind in the region, it highlights the plight of such workers who fall outside of OH&S system. Similarly, Kangéthe, in his Botswanan study found that serious occupational risks and challenges are faced by informal workers who are the primary caregivers for people living with HIV/AIDS. Formally recognised as part of the health system and necessary for easing the burden on health facilities, they are not appropriately supported and protected. The findings are likely to be relevant in similar situations in many countries in the sub-Saharan region.

The third paper by Michell and Geier, returns to the basics of understanding the importance of calibration of audiometry equipment. Without correct calibration, inaccurate test results can be recorded. Methods of calibration in the occupational setting are described, as well as an explanation of calibration requirements with respect to mobile testing facilities.

My fourth example comes from the member societies, all of whom have been very active over the past year, and this is evident in their reports in this issue. All of them feature feedback on their annual congresses or conferences, which were held recently, and they underscore the importance of the participation of their members in their success.

On that note, I would like to thank our readers and subscribers, the Editorial Board and the publishing team at Technique for all your support during 2009. Our occupational health and hygiene professionals deserve recognition for their invaluable contribution to the health of workers. May you have a well earned rest over the coming holiday season and return safely, refreshed to face 2010.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Linda Grainger". The signature is written in dark ink on a white background.