



**Linda Grainger,
Editor**

From the Editor . . .

The special theme for this issue is respiratory health in the occupational context.

We have three papers relating to it, and expect to have a further two in the November/December 2011 issue. The first paper provides the results of an evaluation of different sampling methods for diesel particulate matter. Despite the ubiquitous presence of diesel in workplaces and the health hazards associated

with exposure, an occupational exposure limit has yet to be published for South Africa. However, it is expected that this will be established in the near future. In addition, there is no standardised sampling method. Therefore, the study by Pretorius and Grove makes an important contribution to addressing this issue.

Rockwool, one of the man-made mineral fibres, is commonly used for insulation. Construction workers are frequently exposed to it and although it has been known to act as a respiratory irritant it is often perceived by workers as being of low health risk. Phillips, Davies, Pieterse and Murray present an interesting case study that indicates the need for a more cautious approach. They have demonstrated that these fibres may well be respirable, and long-term lung damage is possible.

South Africa has an extremely high prevalence of TB, and healthcare workers are regularly exposed to patients with active TB, including MDR and XDR-TB. HIV positive healthcare workers are even more susceptible to infection risk. Zungu and Malotle, in their review article, highlight the policies and guidelines to prevent occupationally acquired TB amongst healthcare workers. Despite the existence of good national and international frameworks and policies, their implementation is poor. Readers are urged to use the information to put measures in place at their own workplaces to protect themselves. In addition, our societies and their members can advocate for other healthcare workers who do not have a good understanding of statutory occupational health requirements.

Karen Michell, the current President of SASOHN, has long been concerned about the quality of spirometry testing. She and other like-minded experts were instrumental in the development of the national SANS 451 standard for testing and the unit standard for training in spirometry. At the behest of the Editorial Board, she has produced a report on these activities. The steps that still need to be achieved are highlighted and it is hoped that the information will encourage our members to support these efforts.

Changing the focus from respiratory health, Smit and Brand describe the results of their study on managers' perspectives on whether deaf people could work in the automotive industry. The article is useful as it provides practical information on how such individuals could be accommodated in this setting. It also shows that the possibility of their working in it may not have been considered by managers and it is important that deaf awareness training programmes be provided. Despite the fact that this was a qualitative study in one industry,

empirical evidence suggests that such perspectives may be quite widely held.

Blignaut, Coombs and Schillack have provided an overview of women and work. Following a description of the historical trends in women's work, the health issues that women currently face in relation to work are outlined. Finally, chemical toxicity in relation to women and their fetuses is emphasised.

Elsabé Klinck has addressed a very topical subject in her page – National Health Insurance. She succinctly highlights how the NHI is a measure to provide access to healthcare – a human right in terms of our constitution. However, as many of you are well aware, there are challenges associated with the implementation of such a health system, particularly with respect to financing. Readers are urged to study the NHI Green Paper (see reference 5 on page 37) and provide input on how occupational health and work-based primary care can be effectively integrated into the system.

The Occupational Safety and Health Group of the Cochrane Collaboration recently published a review of the effectiveness of workplace interventions on the outcome of occupational asthma.¹ Low-quality evidence that symptoms and lung function improved after removal from exposure was found. However, they rightly warn that this carries the risk of unemployment. Better studies to identify which interventions give the most benefit are required.

A systematic review which evaluated the effectiveness of interventions to influence workers to wear hearing protection to decrease their exposure to noise has found that some interventions improve the mean use of hearing protection devices compared to non-intervention.² Tailored interventions, such as the use of communication or other types of interventions that are specific to an individual or a group and aim to change behaviour resulted in improved use. Individually tailored education was more effective than target education programmes which address shared worker characteristics. Of note, is that mixed interventions (education, mailing, distribution of HPDs, noise assessments and audiometric testing) were more effective than hearing testing alone.

News from our professional societies is that two of them have elected new Presidents. Charles Mbekeni is the incoming President of the MMPA and Johann Beukes is the President of SAIOH. On behalf of *Occupational Health Southern Africa*, I would like to congratulate them both and wish them a stimulating, productive and effective term of office. I also wish to draw the attention of readers to SAIOH's change of telephone and fax numbers – please see page 39 for details.

1. de Groene GJ, Pal TM, Beach J, Tarlo SM, Spreeuwiers D, et al. Workplace interventions for treatment of occupational asthma. Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews. 2011; Issue 5. Art. No.: CD006308. DOI: 10.1002/14651858.CD006308.pub3.

2. El Dib RP, Mathew JL, Martins RHG. Interventions to promote the wearing of hearing protection. Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews. 2011; Issue 9. Art. No.: CD005234. DOI: 10.1002/14651858.CD005234.pub4.