

SASOM 2021 conference and annual general meeting

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SASOM CONFERENCE 2021

The South African Society of Occupational Medicine (SASOM) Western Cape Chapter hosted the SASOM annual general meeting (AGM) and associated conference on 27 November 2021. Due to the impacts of the ongoing Pandemic, these events were held in a fully virtual format, using the SASOM Zoom platform.

Conference programme

The 2021 SASOM conference was themed *Occupational Health in a Changing World of Work*, and was accredited for seven continuing education units (CEUs – 6 clinical, 1 ethics) by the South African Medical Association (SAMA). The last SASOM Executive Committee (ExCo) meeting of the year was held on Friday 26 November; the AGM followed the closure of the conference, on Saturday 27 November.

Prof. Daan Kocks, Chair of SASOM, officially opened the conference and welcomed all participants, presenters and organisers. The morning session was chaired by Dr Itumeleng Ntamatamala (Chair of the SASOM Western Cape Chapter and occupational medicine specialist at the University of Cape Town (UCT)), who introduced the first four presenters.

Prof. Mohamed Jeebhay (head: Division of Occupational Medicine, UCT), gave the opening presentation titled 'COVID-19 over a year later: reflections from occupational medicine'. He stressed that the Pandemic has affected social groups in different ways and that, although COVID-19 deaths have affected mainly the elderly and those with comorbidities, certain industries and jobs also contributed to the risk of infection, hospitalisation and mortality. Apart from health workers, many sectors involved face-to-face contact and congregate settings, resulting in high risks for SARS-CoV-2 transmission. Prof. Jeebhay drew on various studies to illustrate learnings and their implications for occupational health. The data suggest that, while transmission of the virus risks in high-risk healthcare environments may have been mitigated by effective precautions, insufficient focus persisted on effective preventive measures in workplace contexts with low perceptions of risk.

The second presentation, titled 'Mandatory COVID-19 vaccination in workplaces: unpacking the legal and ethical implications', was delivered by Prof. Leslie London (head: Division of Public Health Medicine, UCT). He reviewed the legal, ethical and human rights bases for considering a policy that limits the rights of employees to refuse vaccination. Irrespective of whether a risk assessment identifies that a mandate is needed, we need to be constantly aware that mandatory vaccination is not a substitute for a comprehensive prevention approach that includes non-pharmacological interventions. Prof. London concluded that, if workplaces rely on vaccine mandates to 'solve' the problem of workplace transmission, given the limits

of vaccines to prevent mild illness, then mandates are likely to be discredited.

Dale Kennedy, a certified professional ergonomist at Ergomax Holdings (Pty Ltd), followed with a presentation titled 'COVID-19 impact on workplace ergonomics and beyond'. He discussed the key challenges that businesses will face as a direct result of the impacts of COVID-19, and shared the key messages from a report published by McKinsey & Company (2021) titled 'What employees are saying about the future of remote work'. His parting message was that businesses will need to challenge long-held beliefs and master new models of working.

Tobias van Reenen, senior engineering researcher at the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), gave the next presentation, titled 'Ventilation in the context of COVID-19'. With COVID-19 being recognised as an airborne disease, appropriate infection control strategies are essential. COVID-19 is understood to be spread via both droplet and airborne mechanisms; however, the relative risk of each mode remains unknown. Ventilation is more effective against long-range airborne transmission than against shorter-range droplet transmission. In this context, it is important to determine how much ventilation is required to offer minimum protection per scenario. Van Reenen concluded that the ventilation rate required to reduce airborne transmission to acceptable levels is unfeasible with extended exposure, hence, including community prevalence levels in a model of 'far-field probability of infection' does not offer sufficient personal protection in real-world scenarios.

The afternoon session was chaired by Dr Geoffrey Tafaune (Deputy Chair of the SASOM Western Cape Chapter, and occupational medicine specialist at Stellenbosch University). He introduced Dr Jan Lapere, private practitioner in occupational medicine, medico-legal and social labour law. In his presentation titled 'Working from home: employer/employee legal responsibilities towards occupational health and safety', Dr Lapere discussed how the COVID-19 pandemic has acutely expanded the working-from-home (WFH) employee cohort to become a substantial occupational group exposed to specific and alternative occupational health and safety (OHS) hazards, and that WFH requires the application of new or complementary risk containment measures. He added that our current labour legislation does not fully cater for a WFH labour relations regime, and neither do our OHS laws. Besides the physical, ergonomic and mechanical OHS risks, WFH employees may be exposed to psychosocial hazards. Assistance may be required for risks such as isolation, blurred boundaries between work and home, and domestic violence. He concluded that specific support, education and planned inspections are important tools to ensure optimal engineering and administrative OHS controls in the 'home workplace'.

The session titled 'Fitness to work assessment of vulnerable employees, post-vaccination: a discussion' was delivered by Dr WAJ (Jack) Meintjes, occupational medicine senior specialist and head: Unit for Infection Prevention and Control, Tygerberg Academic Hospital and Stellenbosch University, Cape Town. His presentation reviewed vulnerability assessments of individuals as a component of the fitness-for-work evaluation. He discussed how this was practically implemented in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, with reasonable accommodation, including the provision of individuals working from home, and/or providing them with special leave during peaks of the Pandemic. He also reviewed the hierarchy of controls, with specific reference to the impact of COVID-19 vaccination on the vulnerability assessments of individuals. Dr Meintjes ended by providing some practical guidance on how to manage vulnerability assessments in individuals who have been vaccinated.

Prof. Stoffel Grobler, a medical doctor, psychiatrist, and head: Clinical Unit, Elizabeth Donkin Hospital, Gqeberha (Port Elizabeth), discussed 'The mental health consequences for healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic'. He briefly reviewed the statistics around the incidence of mental illness amongst healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. He also examined factors associated with severe psychiatric symptoms and disorders amongst healthcare workers, as well as those associated with lower-level psychiatric symptoms. Prof. Grobler discussed disclosure, impairment, impairment assessment, disability, and return to work after being booked off for mental health-related issues. Last, he made the case for adding 'healthcare staff mental health support' as an ongoing agenda item to high-level management planning meetings.

Dr Itumeleng Ntatamala officially closed the conference and thanked all delegates, presenters and organisers for their valuable contributions to the virtual event.

SASOM AGM 2021 – a review of another challenging year

At the AGM, Prof. Daan Kocks (SASOM Chair) read the 2021 annual report prepared by the SASOM 2021 National Secretary, Dr Carmen Whyte, and highlighted the following activities and outcomes for 2021 – another challenging year due to the ongoing Pandemic:

- Due to the COVID-19 situation, SASOM did not hold its annual congress or its AGM in 2020, and the tenure of SASOM's office bearers and ExCo members was extended until the end of 2021.
- The SASOM office bearers for 2022 were elected at the AGM: Prof. Daan Kocks (Chair), Dr André Kotzé (Vice Chair), Dr Frank Fox (Secretary), and Dr Carmen Whyte (Treasurer).
- Jaco Botha resigned as SASOM National Office Co-ordinator, to relocate to New Zealand at the end of March 2021; Claudia Frost started formally in the post on 1 April 2021.
- As at 31 October 2021, SASOM had 427 paid-up members in good standing. This number includes 79 new members, 28 student members (including 17 new student members recruited during the promotional months July-September 2021, when SASOM offered all Postgraduate Diploma in Occupational Health/Occupational Medicine (DOH/DOM) students 50% off SASOM student membership fees as a promotion, to highlight the benefits of membership), 10 honorary life members, and five corporate memberships.
- Formal communication with organisations engaged in the enhancement of occupational medicine continued with SASOM ExCo members (co-opted) from the National Institute for Occupational Health (NIOH), the Compensation Commissioner (CC),

the International Commission on Occupational Health (ICOH), the South African Society of Travel Medicine (SASTM), and the Mine Medical Professionals Association (MMPA).

- SASOM liaison with other organisations continued at both national and international levels, e.g. the South African Department of Employment and Labour (with SASOM being an active participant in, and contributor to, the Occupational Health Forum); *Occupational Health Southern Africa* (OHSA); the Council for Health Service Accreditation of Southern Africa (COHSASA); the International Occupational Medicine Society Collaborative (IOMSC); the American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (ACOEM); and the International Scientific Association Focusing on Occupational and Environmental Health in the Production and Handling of Chemicals (MEDICHEM).

A memorandum of understanding (MoU) was signed between SASOM and the Compensation Fund of the Department of Employment and Labour for mutual benefit to both institutions, in terms of research and teaching activities, and raising the profiles of each entity. The MoU was approved by both parties, and it is envisaged that it will be finalised and implemented during 2022. MEDICHEM extended its MoU with SASOM for the rendering of services related to the MEDICHEM Secretariat until the end of 2022.

- SASOM Guidelines are provided free of charge to members in good standing, as a membership benefit. The Guidelines are continuously revised to ensure that they remain relevant for good practice in occupational health/medicine. The new/revised SASOM Guideline 15, titled 'Spirometry in the Workplace', was finalised and endorsed by the South African Thoracic Society (SATS); it is now available as a SASOM membership benefit.
- SASOM contributed to a paper titled 'Work-related injuries and diseases, and COVID-19', authored by the ICOH management, at the invitation of the International Labour Organization (ILO). The paper was published in the *International Journal of Labour Research* (IJLR) on 2 July 2021. SASOM ExCo members, Prof. Daan Kocks and Claudina Nogueira, contributed sections titled 'Experiences of COVID-19: South Africa' and 'Some lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic'. The paper is available online: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_dialogue/---actrav/documents/publication/wcms_810045.pdf.
- SASOM's communication system improved through the facilitation of member access to the digital publication of *Occupational Health Southern Africa* (OHSA) via a link on the SASOM website (www.sasom.org). SASOM would like to thank Claudina Nogueira for her facilitation of the publication of SASOM's pages in OHSA and Prof. Mary Ross for drafting the CEU questionnaires. Since April 2021, members have been able to complete an electronic version of the CEU questionnaire for each issue, which replaces the previous hardcopy version that was distributed via bulk mailing when OHSA was published in a printed format. Once questionnaires are submitted, the results are returned immediately and a CEU certificate is issued automatically if a mark of more than 70% is achieved. Members can earn three CEU/CPD points per questionnaire, potentially earning up to 18 CEU points per annum.
- SASOM webinars are free to all members. A series of four CPD-accredited training webinars on spirometry was held for SASOM members in August 2021. The webinars were presented by Sr Lindsay Zurba (respiratory nurse practitioner and director and training manager of Education for Health Africa (www.educationforhealth.africa), and SASOM member).

Through a SASOM collaboration, Sr Zurba is offering mentoring and training in spirometry to occupational health practitioners in Zambia. In September 2021, SASOM offered its members a series of three CPD-accredited training webinars on the management of occupational health information under the Protection of Personal Information Act, 2013 (POPIA) and the Promotion of Access to Information Act, 2000 (PAIA). The webinars were facilitated by Dr Jan Lapere.

Table 1. SASOM website visits, Nov 2020–Oct 2021

Month	Unique visitors	No. of visits	Page views
November 2020	1 959	2 858	12 723
December 2020	1 636	2 243	9 488
January 2021	2 348	3 260	13 484
February 2021	2 241	3 404	12 706
March 2021	1 792	2 433	10 328
April 2021	1 618	2 251	11 754
May 2021	1 766	2 269	12 846
June 2021	1 794	2 517	18 366
July 2021	1 871	2 397	23 509
August 2021	1 741	2 177	14 922
September 2021	1 468	1 873	33 523
October 2021	1 437	1 929	34 583
Total	21 671	29 611	208 232

Unique visitors: the no. of visitors, excluding repeat visits; No. of visits: unique visitors, including repeat visits; Page views: no. of pages opened and viewed by visitors

All the SASOM webinar recordings are available on the SASOM website in the 'Members Only' area.

- The SASOM website remains interactive and is continuously updated. Due to ongoing development and increased demand to access the website, hosting was moved, in September 2021, from Afrihost to Domains.co.za. The website statistics indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed significantly to the uptick in website visits (Table 1); the platform is used for sharing information with SASOM members and the general public.

A new geo-map of available occupational medicine practitioner (OMP) services is being developed as a SASOM member benefit, to increase the visibility and communication potential of the SASOM network. As at 31 October 2021, 82 members had opted in to the OMP services directory.

Improvements and developments related to the SASOM website include the following:

- o A facility for ordering SASOM Guidelines online and making payment (in the case of non-members)
- o A facility for application for new or renewed SASOM membership, and making payment online
- o Functionality for SASOM members to manage their own profiles, print their membership cards, and opt in or out of the OMP services directory
- The SASOM Medal of Excellence, Fellowship of the College of Public Health Medicine of South Africa – Division Occupational Medicine: FCPHM(SA) OccMed, was not awarded in 2020 or 2021.



Throwback to the SASOM AGM 2019 and associated conference – the events were hosted by the SASOM Eastern Cape Chapter at the Protea Hotel Port Elizabeth Marine, Summerstrand, Gqeberha (Port Elizabeth)

Photograph: Marissa Muller, SASOM member