

SASOM news

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SASOM HOSTS TWO NATIONAL WEBINARS IN 2025 ON THE INFORMAL SECTOR

The South African Society of Occupational Medicine (SASOM), an affiliate member of the International Commission on Occupational Health (ICOH), organised and hosted two national webinars in 2025, both themed *Occupational Health of Informal and Migrant Workers*. The webinars were presented in collaboration with the Global Coalition for Informal Workers' Health and Wellbeing (GCIW), and the International Human Factors and Ergonomics Association (IEA) Technical Committee on Informal Work (TC IW). Each high-impact webinar was divided into two 2-hour sessions, accredited for Continuing Professional Development (CPD) points by the South African Medical Association (SAMA). The webinars offered local and international participants global perspectives, updated research, and applications to the real world.

SASOM National Webinar 1, 20 June 2025

The webinar was opened by Prof. Daan Kocks, Chair of SASOM, who welcomed the presenters and participants, and introduced the session chairs. Session 1 was sub-themed *Introducing the Global Coalition for Informal Workers Health and Wellbeing (GCIW)*, and chaired by Ms Claudina Nogueira, SASOM Executive Committee (ExCo) member and ICOH National Secretary for South Africa. Presenters and topics were as follows:

- 'Occupational health for informal workers: the Global Coalition for Informal Workers (GCIW) Initiative' was presented by Dr Acran Salmen-Navarro (MD, MSc, AEP) of the Bellevue/New York University (NYU) Occupational Environmental Medicine Clinic, NYU Grossman School of Medicine, USA, and current Chair of the ICOH Scientific Committee on Occupational Health for Health Workers (SC OHHW). He leads the topic of Occupational Health for Migrant Workers in the ICOH Working Group on the Future of Decent Work and, more recently, is one of the leaders spearheading the establishment of the GCIW.

This new coalition is dedicated to safeguarding the health and wellbeing of informal workers across the globe. Its members unite to address the unique challenges faced by individuals engaged in informal employment (around 60% of the global workforce), recognising their invaluable contributions to communities and economies, worldwide.

Dr Salmen-Navarro's presentation set the scene for the webinar by providing background and context on the informal sector from a global perspective. Topics covered included migration; why informal work matters as a social determinant of health; contributions made by migrant and informal workers to national and global

economies; the high risks of vulnerability among migrant and informal workers; new forms of work, including the gig economy; and the future of work.

- 'Bridging informal work and ergonomics: perspectives from the International Ergonomics Association (IEA) Technical Committee on Informal Work' was presented by Clive D'Souza (PhD), Department of Rehabilitation Science and Technology, University of Pittsburgh, USA, and current Chair of the IEA TC IW.

Dr D'Souza provided an overview of the IEA TC IW and its objectives and planned activities for the current year; the key domains of ergonomics and human factors (physical, cognitive, and organisational); the sociotechnical model of ergonomics; and psychosocial factors and worker vulnerabilities in informal economies. He presented a case study on informal electronic waste (e-waste) processing in Ghana, in which he highlighted the interdisciplinarity in addressing informal worker health.

Session 2 was sub-themed *Exposure to occupational heat stress in the informal sector*, and chaired by Dr André Kotzé, Vice Chair of SASOM. Presenters and topics were as follows:

- 'Health effects of occupational heat exposure among informal workers: the South African perspective' was presented by Prof. Rajen Naidoo (MBChB, DOH, MPH, PhD), Head of Discipline of Occupational and Environmental Health, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa. He discussed how extreme heat is becoming more dangerous for workers every year; informal work in the era of climate change; evidence of heat exposure and heat stress across the African continent; health effects and occupational injuries associated with excessive heat exposure and stress; why informal workers are at greater risk of the health impacts of heat stress; and challenges for heat protection programmes among informal workers. He concluded with necessary and urgent actions and the role that occupational medical practitioners and professional associations can play in managing heat exposure in workplaces, including the informal sector.
- 'Informal women workers on the frontline of the climate crisis: the experience from the Self-Employed Women's Association Bharat (SEWA Bharat) and lessons from India' was presented by Ms Sonal Sharma (MA: Development Studies), senior programme coordinator, SEWA Bharat, India. Ms Sharma is a development practitioner, specialising in informality with a focus on women's economic empowerment. At SEWA Bharat, she has established and expanded programme areas aimed at promoting the growth of women-led micro-enterprises and advancing women's land

rights. She has led and studied community-driven, knowledge-based interventions designed to build resilience and enhance capacity among women in the informal economy. Currently, she is guiding the organisation's exploration of intersections within women's work, such as those between entrepreneurship and the global care agenda, and between livelihoods and climate justice.

Ms Sharma provided an overview and the objectives of SEWA internationally, and more specifically, in India. She also discussed the impact of climate change and environmental degradation on livelihoods, and adaptations by female workers in the informal economy; pathways to a just transition for female workers in the informal economy; and collective action for climate justice, as well as selected key findings and recommendations from a study that gathered insights from more than 1 100 women working in India's informal sector.

Prof. Kocks closed the proceedings by extending appreciation to all presenters for their insightful contributions, as the session greatly enhanced the participants' understanding of occupational health and safety (OHS) and labour issues within the informal sector, from a global perspective (USA, India, and South Africa). He underscored that meaningful progress can be achieved through transformation within the informal sector, using the example of successful e-waste management in Ghana, and stressed that the southern African situation reflects a broader global challenge, and that collective public action remains essential in addressing it. Prof. Kocks also thanked the organisers and session chairs for their support, expertise, and leadership in the various aspects of webinar preparation and delivery. He encouraged participants to remain engaged through the SASOM website and communication channels, and to look out for information about the second webinar later in the year. The recording of the webinar is available in the public domain: <https://www.youtube.com/live/1A77-D97ZrM>

SASOM National Webinar 2, 29 August 2025

The webinar was opened by Dr Itumeleng Ntatamala (SASOM Western Cape Chapter and University of Cape Town, South Africa), who welcomed the presenters and participants, and introduced the moderator of the first session. Speakers in this session discussed the magnitude of unique hazards faced by informal workers globally, particularly in Africa and Asia, emphasising the lack of legal protection, access to health services, and research. The second session explored the political economy of OHS and informality, presenting the migrant-informal worker cross-section as a critical vulnerability. The discussion also featured models of the social determinants of health to understand the complex relationship between informal work and health outcomes, concluding with the need for policy changes, increased professional capacity, and participatory action research to achieve health equity and decent work.

Session 1 was titled 'Occupational health of informal workers: drivers, new forms of work, and OHS challenges', moderated by Dr Acran Salmen-Navarro (GCIW founding member and recently elected president, Chair of ICOH SC OHHW, and New York University Grossman School of Medicine, USA). Presenters and topics were as follows:

- 'Pathways towards decent work for informal workers' was presented by Mr Mahinda Seneviratne (ICOH Board member, immediate Past Chair of the ICOH Scientific Committee on Occupational Health in Small-Scale Enterprises and the Informal Sector (SC OHSSEIS), and work health strategist, Australia). A Fellow of the Australian Institute of Occupational Hygienists, Mr Seneviratne has led significant initiatives, including i) Ghana's first occupational hygiene workshop in 2011 to build occupational hygiene capability in small enterprises, ii) Australia's implementation of the Globally Harmonised System (GHS) for Classification and Labelling of Hazardous Chemicals, and iii) investigations into silicosis among engineered stone manufacturers and installers that led to landmark legal action in Australia in 2024.

WEBINAR

"OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH OF INFORMAL AND MIGRANT WORKERS"

FRIDAY, 20 JUNE 2025



SASOM

South African Society
of Occupational Medicine

FOUNDED IN 1948

MEET OUR SPEAKERS

SESSION 1: 2:00PM - 4:00PM		SESSION 2: 4:00PM - 6:00PM	
 	 <p style="margin: 0; font-weight: bold; color: white;">Acran Salmen-Navarro</p> <p style="margin: 0; font-size: 0.8em; color: white;">MD, MSc, AEP (Bellevue/NYU Occupational Environmental Medicine Clinic, New York University Grossman School of Medicine, USA)</p>	 <p style="margin: 0; font-weight: bold; color: white;">Clive D'Souza PhD</p> <p style="margin: 0; font-size: 0.8em; color: white;">(Department of Rehab Science and Technology, University of Pittsburgh, USA)</p>	 <p style="margin: 0; font-weight: bold; color: white;">Rajen Naidoo</p> <p style="margin: 0; font-size: 0.8em; color: white;">MChB, DOH, MPH, PhD (Head of Discipline and Professor, Occupational and Environmental Health, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa)</p>
	 <p style="margin: 0; font-weight: bold; color: white;">Sonal Sharma</p> <p style="margin: 0; font-size: 0.8em; color: white;">MA: Development Studies (Senior Programme Coordinator, SEWA Bharat, India)</p>		

Graphic: Claudia Frost (SASOM, South Africa)

Mr Seneviratne provided a brief overview of the OHS of informal workers, detailing specific challenges and proposing future pathways for action. He highlighted that informal workers constitute a large part of the workforce globally, particularly in Africa and Asia (90% or more). They face unique hazards, such as exposure to high temperatures, effects of climate change, and physical dangers. A critical challenge is the lack of access to basic occupational health services: only about 15% of global workers (formal and informal) have access to these services, and legislation often fails to cover them. Suggested pathways include regulatory reform (e.g. shifting legislation concepts from 'employer' to 'person in control' and from 'employee' to 'worker' to expand coverage); improving prevention through better hazard identification and risk control; and implementing participatory action research. The last is crucial to ensure that workers' voices are heard and taken seriously.

- 'The ergonomics/human factors approach to decent work for informal workers: a South African case study' was presented by Prof. Andrew Thatcher (Psychology Department, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa and President of the IEA). A certified professional ergonomist with the Ergonomics Society of South Africa (ESSA) and a registered industrial psychologist with the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA), Prof. Thatcher is a member of the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society of the USA, a member of the Academy of Science of South Africa, and has served as Co-Editor-in-Chief of *Ergonomics*.

Prof. Thatcher applied an ergonomics and human factors approach to understanding informal workers, using a case study of Warrick Junction, an informal trading market in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal province, South Africa. He noted that extreme inequality and high unemployment rates (over 30% in South Africa) drive people into informal work. Ergonomics is viewed as a design discipline that focuses on optimising system performance and wellbeing (psychological and physical) by considering the system of tasks, tools, and environment. The case study revealed that informal workers, such as cooks of bovine and sheep heads, and water transporters, work under extreme conditions, including exceptionally long working days (up to 15.5 hours) and minimal sleep (as little as 4.5 hours nightly). The ergonomic approach emphasises joint optimisation – integrating formal and informal systems, treating humans as assets, and fostering solutions collaboratively with workers.

- 'Closing the gap: occupational health, poverty, and decent work for informal workers' was presented by Mr Matthew Olota, a chartered occupational hygienist at Irving Oil Limited, New Brunswick, Canada, with more than 15 years of experience across oil and gas, manufacturing, and aviation industries. Mr Olota is President-Elect of the International Occupational Hygiene Association (IOHA) and Board representative of the Association of Industrial Hygienists Nigeria (AIHN). He has led occupational health programmes involving multidisciplinary teams and is highly skilled in health risk assessment, medical surveillance, and workplace health evaluations.

Mr Olota's presentation focused on the occupational hygiene challenges and the need to close the gap for informal workers. He cited sobering International Labour Organization (ILO) data, indicating that 2.93 million people die annually from work, with

2.6 million deaths from occupational diseases. He emphasised that informal workers (60% of the global workforce) are real people facing real exposures, but they lack professional services such as exposure assessment and medical surveillance. A central challenge is poverty, which makes protective measures unsustainable (e.g. a low-earning worker cannot afford expensive disposable respirators). He highlighted the severe global deficit of certified occupational hygienists (e.g. Africa has 0.5 hygienists per million workers). Proposed solutions included increasing capacity building, utilising low-cost assessment tools and controls (e.g. free health apps), driving systemic change through effective policy and partnerships (especially in terms of engaging politicians and media), and demonstrating value through improved national data collection.

Session 2 was titled 'Occupational health of informal and migrant workers: community engagement and collective action', moderated by Dr Maggie Graf (GCIW founding member and recently elected Treasurer, and Immediate Past Vice President and Secretary General of IEA, Switzerland), who currently serves as the European coordinator of the IEA TC IW. Presenters and topics were as follows:

- 'Political economy of OHS and informality: the struggle for health justice for workers in the informal economy' was presented by Dr Christy Adeola Braham (Workers' Health Coordinator at Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO), UK and Belgium). Dr Braham is a public health specialist and doctoral fellow, School of Health and Related Research, University of Sheffield, UK. At WIEGO, she leads health research and advocacy to strengthen grassroots workers' organisations and advance OHS and the right to health for all in the informal economy. A Senior Atlantic Fellow for Health Equity at the Milken Institute School of Public Health at George Washington University, she has coordinated regional health and migration platforms, represented WIEGO in International Labour Conference negotiations for global standards on biological hazards in the working environment, 2024–2025 (ILO Convention 192 and Recommendation 209), and contributed to the Wellcome Collection exhibition 'Hard Graft: Work, Health and Rights' (2024, London, UK).

Dr Braham discussed the political economy and the struggle for health justice for informal workers. She established that informality is the norm and is growing globally. Workers in this sector (waste pickers, street vendors, home-based workers, etc.) lack fundamental protections, often operating outside OHS laws in public or private spaces that are not recognised as legitimate workplaces. This forces workers to be self-reliant amidst extreme income insecurity. She stressed that challenges are fundamentally political, caused by poor collaboration between government ministries, and a systematic lack of value given to marginalised workers. She presented examples of effective grassroots action: the Indonesian Migrant Domestic Workers Association (PERTIMIG) educating members on negotiating vaccination access, and HomeNet Thailand integrating OHS services into universal coverage through mobile vans and enhanced surveillance.

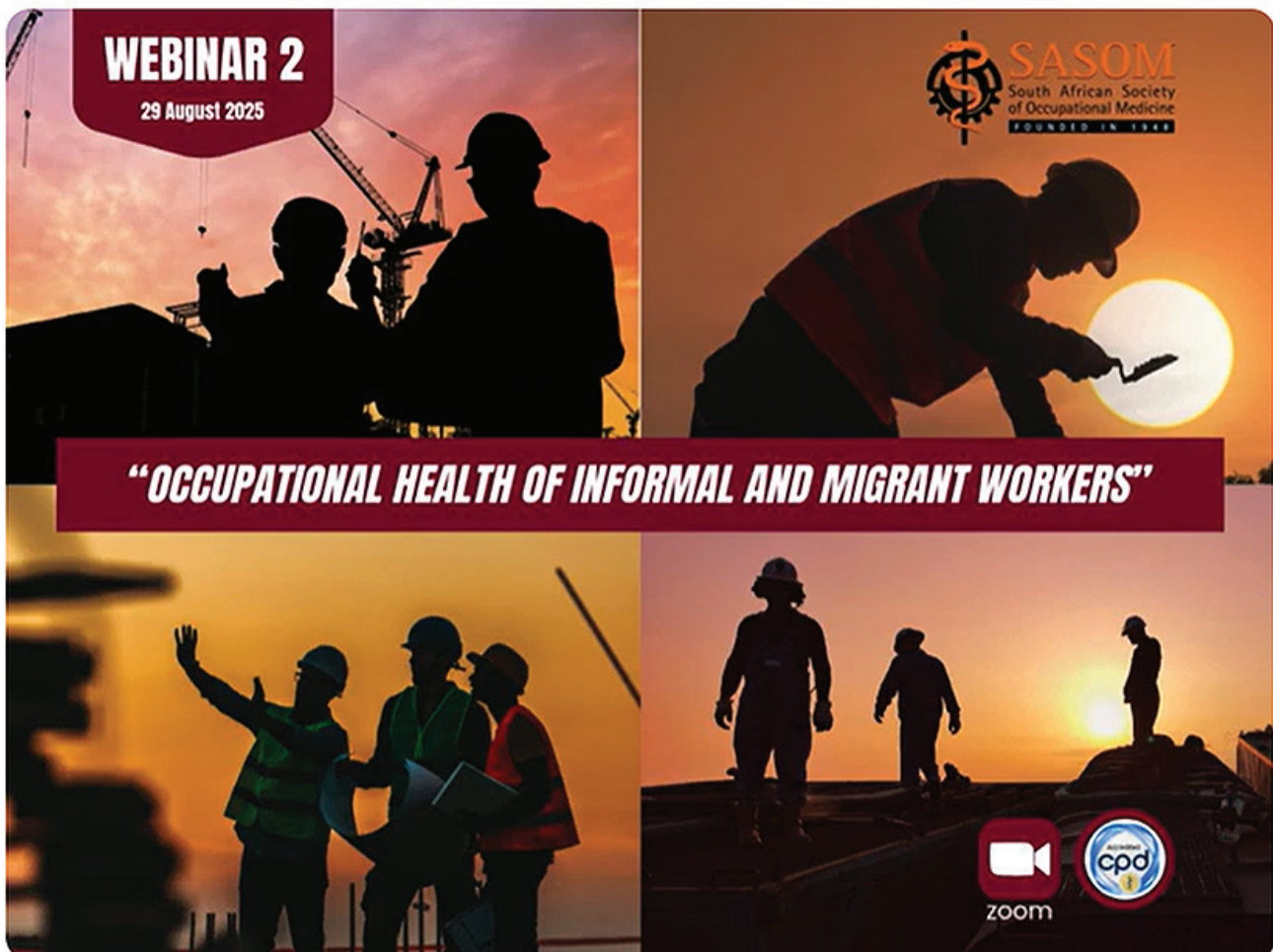
- 'Occupational health for vulnerable workers: the cross-section between migration and informal work' was presented by Dr Acran Salmen-Navarro, moderator of Session 1 (GCIW founding member and recently elected president, Chair of the ICOH SC OHHW, and NYU Grossman School of Medicine, USA). He focused

on the cross-section of migration and informal work, asserting that work is implicit in nearly all social determinants of health. The main drive for migration is often work, and approximately 65% of migrants are prone to entering the informal sector in their host countries. Migrants frequently encounter precarious '4D jobs' (dirty, dangerous, demanding, and discriminatory). Clinically, these workers present unique challenges, sometimes consulting a doctor for the first time in their life, for an occupational injury. Despite vulnerability, they contribute significantly to global economies through remittances (nearly US\$ 800 billion in 2022) and local economies (e.g. foreign-born New Yorkers contributed 22% of city GDP in 2017). Good practices include offering clinical and preventive services, regardless of ability to pay or status, such as at the Bellevue NYU clinic, and partnering with community-based organisations (CBOs) to perform outreach. He emphasised preparing for the future of decent work, which must address new forms of informal work such as app-based and entrepreneurial options.

- 'Informal work as a social determinant of health' was presented by Prof. Carlos Andrés Fandiño Losada (Chair of the Organising Committee of the First International Conference of the GCIW, and *Universidad del Valle*, Santiago de Cali, Colombia). He is a medical doctor and epidemiologist with a PhD in Medical Sciences from the Karolinska Institute, Sweden. He has worked in the Department of Public Health at the School of Health of *Universidad del Valle*, Colombia since 2010, initially appointed as an assistant professor, and becoming a full professor in 2024. He was appointed

as Editor-in-Chief of *Colombia Médica* in 2025 and serves as an associate editor for *Cambridge Prisms: Global Mental Health*. His career includes consultancy work for the Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO) in Colombia's Ministry of Health in Bogotá, and multiple academic collaborations in Latin America and Europe, along with several prestigious awards.

Prof. Fandiño Losada provided a theoretical framework for informal work as a social determinant of health. Using models like the Dahlgren-Whitehead model, he positioned informal work within the layer of living and working conditions. This model is a visual tool, often called the 'rainbow', which maps the relationship between individual, environment, and health by illustrating the layers of determinants that influence health outcomes. It organises these determinants from the individual outward, starting with individual lifestyle factors, moving to social networks and, finally, to broader socioeconomic and environmental conditions. Informal employment is characterised as a form of precarious work. He highlighted that research findings on health consequences (such as mental health, injuries, and mortality) are inconsistent and complex, and often dependent on the reference group used for comparison (e.g. formal workers versus unemployed). While informal work can be linked to poor health and exposure to risk, in specific contexts, some studies show a neutral or even protective effect of working in the informal sector (e.g. allowing for more breastfeeding time for certain urban workers). He concluded that a multi-level research



Graphic: Claudia Frost (SASOM, South Africa)

approach is necessary to understand the structural context that shapes the health consequences of informal work, and to reduce health inequalities.

Dr Geoffrey Tafaune (SASOM Treasurer and University of Pretoria, South Africa) closed the proceedings by wrapping up the event and thanking the organisers, presenters and participants for a successful webinar. The recording of the webinar is available in the public domain: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RhWWwu7iE_o

Congratulations and celebrations

The SASOM ExCo and its members are delighted to extend their hearty congratulations to Mr Deon Jansen van Vuuren, registered occupational hygienist (retired) and General Manager of the Southern African Institute for Occupational Hygiene (SAIOH), sister organisation of SASOM, on being bestowed with the prestigious SAIOH Lifetime Achievement Award at the SAIOH Annual Conference 2025, held recently in Umhlanga, KwaZulu-Natal. This follows the award of another prestigious accolade, the IOHA’s Lifetime Achievement Award in 2024, bestowed on him at the IOHA International Conference in Dublin, Ireland. These awards are testaments to Deon’s illustrious career and lifelong dedication and contribution to the noble profession of occupational hygiene, and its development, at national, regional, and global levels. Congratulations, Deon!

News from the SASOM National Office

SASOM held its Annual General Meeting (AGM) and Conference on 15 November 2025 at the Marriott Hotel Fire & Ice, Menlyn, Pretoria, Gauteng. The hybrid event, themed *Artificial Intelligence (AI) at the Crossroads of Informal Work and Public Health: Risks, Innovations, and Responsibilities*, was hosted and organised by the SASOM National Office in collaboration with GCIW and ESSA. A report on the SASOM Conference is available on pages 169–171 of this issue.

Membership renewals for 2026 will only open after the SASOM AGM. The 2026 membership fees will be confirmed at the AGM on 15 November 2025 and once approved, the renewal portal will be opened, and all current members will be notified by e-mail with instructions to complete their renewal. New applicants can access information about membership and benefits on the website, and follow the instructions for becoming members of SASOM: <https://sasom.org/membership/>

The SASOM National Office will close for the year-end holiday season on 1 December 2025 and re-open on 12 January 2026.

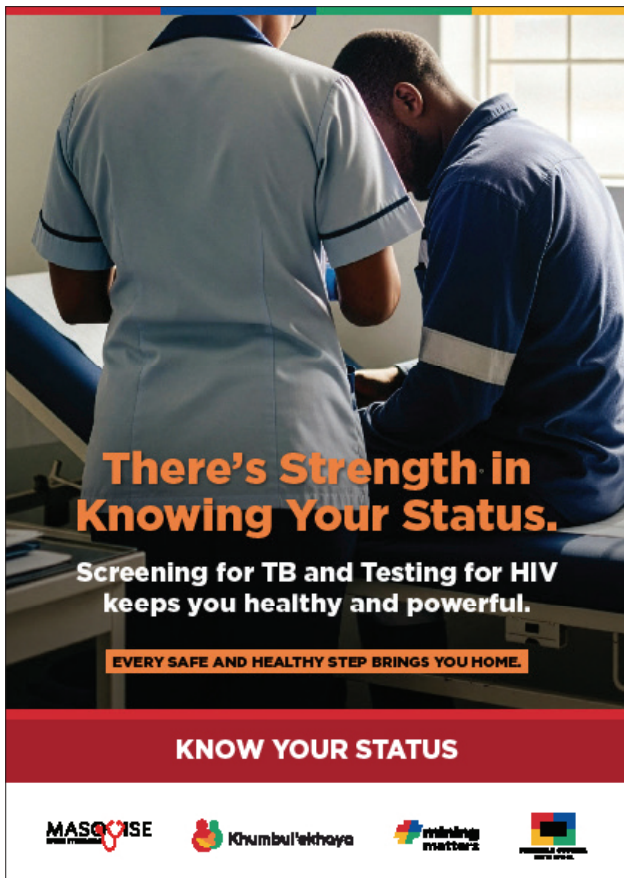
Season’s greetings from SASOM

As the festive season approaches, SASOM reaffirms its commitment to the enduring values of gratitude, mindfulness, hope, and reflection. The Society extends its sincere wishes to all members – and to their families, friends, and communities – for a joyful, safe, and peaceful holiday season, marked by good health, optimism, and many blessings.

SASOM wishes all who celebrate Christmas, or other festive occasions at this time of year, a season filled with peace of mind, compassion, and fulfilment. May the New Year bring continued success, personal wellbeing, and professional growth.

The Society remains steadfast in its commitment to advancing excellence in occupational health and medicine, and to providing meaningful support to its members. SASOM also takes pride in its ongoing collaboration with *Occupational Health Southern Africa*, a valued partner and key source of knowledge and expertise in our region.

SASOM extends its appreciation to all members for their dedication and continued engagement. Together, we look forward to a year ahead marked by growth, impact, and shared achievement. 📌



There’s Strength in Knowing Your Status.
Screening for TB and Testing for HIV keeps you healthy and powerful.
EVERY SAFE AND HEALTHY STEP BRINGS YOU HOME.

KNOW YOUR STATUS

MASOISE Khumbul'ekhaya training matters



Take Care of Your Health.
Body, mind, and heart. Every step counts.
EVERY SAFE AND HEALTHY STEP BRINGS YOU HOME.

TAKE CARE OF YOUR HEALTH

MASOISE Khumbul'ekhaya training matters