

Between adulation and denunciation: the institutional benefits of ambivalence in the history of occupational medicine

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A consensus exists in the history of South African occupational health that tracks back from McCulloch to the very earliest writings on the gold mines. There is a general scholarly agreement that the mines have acted as engines of disease in the subcontinent, and that the medical interventions and forms of compensation offered by the institutions of industrial medicine amounted to – at best – weak and ineffective remedies or – at worst – masks of ongoing contamination. In this talk I offer a critique of this consensus, asking – in light of the rapid decline in industrial employment and the widespread collapse of associated state institutions – what was internationally interesting and significant about the century of South African industrial medicine, and what it means for public health that the field no longer exists.



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