


Ethical dilemmas in the workplace during COVID-19

Occupational Hygiene perspective

Background


- Occupational Hygiene is the discipline of anticipating, recognising, evaluating and controlling health hazards in the working environment with the objective of protecting worker health and well-being and safeguarding the community at large.
- Occupational Hygiene has also been defined as the practice of identifying of hazardous agents; chemical, physical and **biological**; in the workplace that could cause disease or discomfort, evaluating the extent of the risk due to exposure to these hazardous agents, and the control of those risks to prevent ill-health in the long or short term.
- Occupational Hygienists have faced several ethical dilemmas during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of these challenges will be discussed today, but it is not covering everything the Occupational Hygienist encountered during the pandemic, and opinions and experiences will differ.
- **Two key dilemmas:**
 - Balancing worker safety and business operations...Occupational Hygienists had to ensure the safety and well-being of workers while also considering the impact on business operations. This balance proved to be challenging, especially when implementing strict safety measures that effected production.
 - Prioritising limited resources... During the pandemic, there has been a scarcity of resources such as PPE and testing kits. Occupational hygienists (and other Health and Safety professionals) had to make ethical decisions on how to allocate those limited resources to protect workers effectively.



The Southern African Institute for
Occupational Hygiene

Code of Ethics
I am obliged and committed to:

- Carry out the practise of Occupational Hygiene according to the highest moral standards and principles;
- Serving the occupational health needs of workers and contributing to the environmental health of the community;
- Conducting my professional affairs with integrity and impartiality;
- Protecting the confidentiality of health data and respecting the dignity and privacy of workers;
- Maintaining the competence necessary to provide a professional service;
- Ensuring and maintaining full professional independence, and
- Honouring my colleagues at all times and protecting their integrity.



Name and Surname : _____

Signed : _____

Date : _____

The first weeks....

- The daily increase in the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in SA led to the president declaring the outbreak as a National State of Disaster on 15th of March 2020. Shortly after, on 23th March, a nationwide level five (L5) lockdown was announced, which commenced on 27th of March 2020.
- **Essential services...** an essential service is defined in Section 213 of the Labour Relations Act 66 of 1995 (LRA). In terms of this Section, a service is deemed an essential service if it can be shown that the interruption of such a service would: “endanger the life, personal safety or health of the whole or any part of the population”. (food, medicine, healthcare, energy, fuel, essential municipal services, internet and banking services)
- *“Essential services, and those that support them, will continue to provide the necessities of life for everyone during the lockdown period. This means that food, medicine, healthcare, energy, fuel, essential municipal services, internet and banking services will continue to be available. During the lockdown, anyone not working in essential services must stay at home and stop all physical interactions with others outside of your household. If you’re unsure whether your business provides essential services, you should close for the duration of the lockdown. We need as many businesses as possible to close to slow the spread of the virus.*
- *“If your business is considered essential, you must operate in a way that minimises the risk of COVID-19 transmission. Businesses should:*
 - *minimise, or eliminate if possible, physical interactions among staff and with and between customers*
 - *ensure appropriate health, hygiene and safety measures are in place*
 - *restrict activity to only what is essential during this period”*
- How to protect workers against COVID-19 in the workplace?
 - Workplace Health/Exposure/Transmission assessment
 - Workplace measurement
 - Control measures



1: Occupational hygienists not recognized as “essential workers” / “essential service”

COVID-19 transmission assessments

- The unknown risk.....
- Social media impact
- Occupational hygiene training and practices on biological hazards

2: How to deal with the unknow whilst not putting oneself at risk

- Access to knowledge
- Access to facilities
- Lack of tools and reference material
- Uncertainty on what “COVID-19 safe work environment” look like...

3: Fear of missing something



Science vs. myth vs. the unknown

- Temperature screening
- Spray tunnels
- Ultraviolet (UV) lights
- Disinfecting groceries
- Using hand sanitizer
- many more...

4: Access to latest scientific research and information and applying the knowledge. Stay informed about evidence-based prevention measures. Adapt to new information and adjust preventative measures accordingly.



Respirators, masks & face coverings

- Lots of confusion, miss-information and uncertainties
 - Workplace protection vs. protection of the public
 - The “N95/KN95/FFP3 debate”
 - “exhalation valve”
 - Inflated costs and availability
 - Lack of user/public guidance & training
 - Cleaning, maintenance, replacements, etc.
 - Face shields
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- In principle, occupational hygienists are trained to implement respiratory protection programmes. They are specialists in the management of respiratory risks, incl. the selection and use of respirators and masks, and they are specifically trained to manage biological risks across all work context.

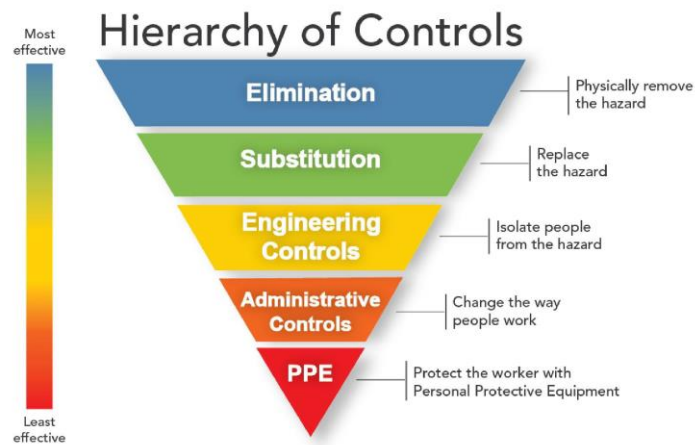
5: SA Occupational hygienists and SAIOH were not (or where not allowed too) be at the front of advising on the selection and use of the appropriate respirators, masks and other types of face covering. No formal advise on the topic from SAIOH.



Indoor air quality and ventilation

- The critical contribution of good indoor air quality and ventilation in workplaces to prevent transmission not initially recognised.
- Bigger issue...poor understanding of the basic principles of the hierarchy of controls or its applicability to the management of COVID in the workplace – the failure to use systematic and proven approaches to the management of risk in the strategy and approaches resulted in gaps in the consideration of how to manage pandemic risks.
- Again, as with RPE, occupational hygienists are specialists in the management of indoor air quality and ventilation.

6: SA Occupational hygienists and SAIOH were not (or where not allowed to) be at the front of advising on indoor air quality and building ventilation. No formal advise on the topic from SAIOH.



Confidentiality and privacy concerns

- Temperature screening data
- “Vulnerable workers”
- “Vaccinated” vs. “non-vaccinated” workers
- Contact tracing
- Long COVID surveillance

7: Protecting the confidentiality of health and personal data of workers proved quite challenging and a dilemma for occupational hygienists.

Learnings

- **Addressing Inequities and Vulnerabilities...**The pandemic has highlighted existing inequities and vulnerabilities in the workforce, with certain groups facing higher risks of exposure and adverse outcomes. Occupational Hygienists must advocate for fair and equitable protection measures for all workers, regardless of their background or status.
- **Ethical Communication and Transparency...** Clear and transparent communication is essential during a public health crisis. Occupational Hygienists need to communicate health and safety guidelines effectively, address worker concerns, and provide accurate information while avoiding misinformation and fearmongering.
- **Upholding Professional Standards and Integrity...** Occupational Hygienists are bound by professional standards and ethical guidelines in their practice. They must uphold these standards while navigating the complexities of the pandemic and making decisions that prioritize the health and safety of workers.
- Overall, Occupational Hygienists played a crucial (but not recognised) role in protecting the health and well-being of workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, and addressing ethical challenges is essential to ensure responsible and effective occupational health management and pandemic preparedness.