

Research to understand Covid-19's effect on the mining industry

Fundamental research is critical to support the mining industry and others in dealing with the impact of Covid-19.



Dr Thuthula Balfour

"While the mortality rate in the mining industry is lower compared to the rest of the country, we recognise that we are only seeing the initial impact of the pandemic in some regions and that it is likely that mining operations will be affected similarly to the regions in which we operate," says Dr Thuthula Balfour, head: health at the Minerals Council.

"As healthcare professionals in this industry, we are continually learning about this disease and its impact. A particular focus is to understand what makes people vulnerable and what we can do to prevent people from dying."

Taking this into consideration, the CEO Zero Harm Forum reallocated research funding to focus on three Covid-19 related areas, namely understanding the nature of the virus, changing behaviours to stop the spread and a geographic information mapping system (GIS) to enhance decision-making.

Research

The Minerals Council is collaborating with the Aurum Institute to conduct an analysis of the cases and deaths suffered until 20 June. This analysis will improve and accelerate learnings in support of the Minerals Council's Covid-19 response and surveillance. The project comprises two phases aimed at reviewing and analysing the data currently collected by council members, and reviewing the case files of up to 2,000 individuals who have tested positive across the mining industry to characterise the cases and determine similarities between different cases and possible areas of transmission and high risk.

The Minerals Council has also commissioned Unisa to conduct a study the effectiveness of all the control measures currently in place across the mining industry and whether these are achieving the intended objectives and what improvements are required.

Behaviour change

Work is underway with mining companies and behaviour change experts focused on sharing and understanding leading practices and lessons to change behaviour among employees and in communities. Here, collective efforts are concentrated

on researching healthy and safe behaviours to prevent and control Covid-19; identifying and assessing leading practices across the mining industry; and developing practical field guides to share the findings and improve our efforts.

This work will result in two field guides aimed at addressing behaviour and empowering employees with the necessary knowledge and self-awareness to be agents of change within their communities.

Geographic information mapping system

Given that Covid-19 is a geographic disease, the Minerals Council is in the process of developing and implementing a GIS to inform decisions and mitigate the risks associated with transmission. The system outlines the prevalence of transmissions in communities and provides an overview of the coping mechanisms in place in different areas, such as hospitals and clinics.

“Ultimately, the research and work we are currently undertaking will be important to mining and beyond, adding to the fundamental knowledge of the disease and how to deal with it,” says Balfour.

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