COVID-19 in South Africa: An occupational disease

To the Editor: We note the response by Chirico and Magnavita[1] to our letter to the Editor,[2] in which we stated that under certain circumstances COVID-19 should be regarded as an occupational disease. These authors pointed out that in Italy, COVID-19 potentially acquired through workplace exposure is recognised by the Italian National Institute of Insurance Against Accidents at Work as a 'biological injury'. This recognition is based on the argument that SARS-CoV-2 infection is an occupational injury, because it happens suddenly at a specific time, usually within the work shift (24 hours), and that COVID-19 is a disease resulting from a SARS-CoV-2 infection. We support the view that COVID-19 is a disease resulting from SARS-CoV-2 infection, as declared by the World Health Organization.[3] It follows, therefore, that if COVID-19 results from exposure to SARS-CoV-2 in the workplace, it can be considered an occupational disease.

Inasmuch as Italian workers are entitled to insurance benefits resulting from biological injury in the workplace, including SARS-CoV-2 infection,[1] the South African Department of Employment and Labour promulgated an instruction inviting claims for compensation for COVID-19 as an occupational disease, provided that specific criteria are met.[4]

We would like to conclude our response by highlighting that, irrespective of whether COVID-19 is regarded as an injury or a disease, the rights of workers with regard to compensation for occupational injuries and/or diseases should be respected. The fact that COVID-19 may be acquired through transmission of the virus in the workplace obligates employers to ensure that affected employees have a legal right to compensation.

Robin George
Occupational Health, Momentum Metropolitan Health, Centurion, South Africa

Ann George
Centre for Health Science Education, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa
ann.george@wits.ac.za
