

A NEW CHAIR IN OCCUPATIONAL HYGIENE AT WITS

The University of the Witwatersrand (Wits University) has received an investment of R15 million from Anglo American for a new research chair, to be known as the Anglo American Endowed Chair in Occupational Hygiene, in the Wits School of Public Health in the Faculty of Health Sciences.

The Chair will conduct research, and engage in other scholarly activities, with the aim of decreasing employee exposure to dust, noise, and other health hazards in mining and other industries, thereby contributing to employee wellbeing.

'The Wits School of Public Health has long been the forerunner in the country in research and postgraduate studies in occupational health. We are very proud to have been granted the funds by Anglo American for this Chair, and we are thankful that they are collaborating with us to strengthen our response to occupational hygiene, both in South Africa and Africa', said Professor Adam Habib, Wits Vice-Chancellor and Principal.

'The University's responsiveness in this important field will advance our vision as a globally competitive and locally relevant university located in the economic and social hub of Africa'.

Khanyisile Kweyama, Executive Director of Anglo American in South Africa said: 'This investment reinforces Anglo American's commitment to health and safety and to the well-being of our people and communities, through partnerships with government, academia, and other stakeholders.'

'Our occupational health strategy and management approach is governed by a series of standards, guidelines, and assurance processes aimed at preventing harm to our workforce. We are proud of our partnership with Wits University, which leverages the institution's leading research and teaching expertise across a wide spectrum of disciplines within the area of occupational health and hygiene. The partnership will further see a strengthening of the existing link between Anglo American and the University's mining engineering degree,' concluded Kweyama.

Occupational hygiene is the discipline of anticipation, recognition, evaluation, and control of health hazards in the workplace.

Dr Andrew Swanepoel, Senior Lecturer and Master of Public Health Occupational Hygiene Coordinator in the Wits School of Public Health, explains: 'Other examples of hazards that can be measured and controlled by occupational hygienists include airborne pollutants such as gases, fumes, noise, vibration, temperature extremes, and biological hazards such as Legionella bacteria.'

'State-of-the-art equipment and systems, combined with high-level research and expert practitioners, are needed to identify, monitor, and control exposure to harmful dust, and all other mining industry-related health hazards,' said Swanepoel.

The University is well placed to conduct world-class research in occupational hygiene. For more than three decades, Wits academics from the School of Public Health, in partnership with the National Institute for Occupational Health (NIOH), have been conducting ground-breaking research on mining-related diseases.

'The new partnership with Anglo American is particularly important, as the University was founded on the School of Mining almost a century ago', said Swanepoel. 'Mining continues to play a central role in shaping the social, political, economic, and health landscape of South Africa and Africa today, where mining activities are rapidly expanding'.

'Mining and occupational hygiene and health are inseparable, and there is a severe shortage of occupational hygienists in South Africa and Africa. This, together with insufficient resources to support occupational hygiene, compromises the ability of the industry to protect and promote the health and well-being of employees', said Swanepoel.

The new Chair will build on the Wits School of Public Health's track record and strengthen occupational hygiene by increasing the number of Masters and PhD graduates, as well as postdoctoral fellows. Cutting-edge research will enhance the health and wellbeing of workers in various industries.

Over the next five years, the R15 million will:

- Establish and support a Chair in Occupational Hygiene to establish leadership in the University for this discipline. This will increase the research output for industry by developing a research programme, sourcing research funding, and enhancing curriculum development and teaching of occupational hygiene – appropriate for South Africa's and Africa's industries, with mining being prominent
- Jointly develop and present, in collaboration with Anglo American, short courses certified by Wits University to enhance the skills and knowledge of current occupational hygiene practitioners
- Further develop the Master of Public Health (MPH) in Occupational Hygiene and the training of professional occupational hygienists
- Strengthen occupational hygiene in South Africa and Africa by increasing the number of students graduating with MPH and PhD degrees, and post-doctoral students. Research supervisory capacity for occupational hygiene students will also be created
- Create African leaders in occupational hygiene through the PhD programme that will provide the leadership, knowledge, and skills to reduce hazards at the workplace and protect the health of employees
- Strengthen national and international links with occupational hygienists and related organizations, and recruit expert local and international teachers for occupational hygiene degree programmes and short courses
- Develop an integrated knowledge repository to service the occupational hygiene needs of Anglo American and the mining industry, over a wide range of parameters. Other industries will be embraced as well.

B. Zuma
Communications Officer, University of the Witwatersrand