



## COVID-19 in South Africa: An occupational disease

**To the Editor:** We note the response by Chirico and Magnavita<sup>[1]</sup> to our letter to the Editor,<sup>[2]</sup> 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.<sup>[1]</sup> We support the view that COVID-19 is a disease resulting from SARS-CoV-2 infection, as declared by the World Health Organization.<sup>[3]</sup> 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,<sup>[1]</sup> 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.<sup>[4]</sup>

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.

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*S Afr Med J* 2020;110(8):705. <https://doi.org/10.7196/SAMJ.2020.v110i8.14993>