

# African Union COVID-19 / Occupational Safety and Health **GUIDELINES SERIES**

*Health and Wellness of  
Health Workers*

**Volume 3**



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## Foreword



The COVID-19 pandemic is significantly impacting economies, social cohesion and health systems of African Countries. The effects of the pandemic, if not efficiently and effectively addressed, will have an adverse impact on the realisation of continental goals set in the African Union (AU) Agenda 2063, the Sustainable Development Goals and other developmental goals and targets at the continental, regional and national level.

In February 2020, the AU Member States adopted a strategy that aims to prevent severe illness and death from COVID-19 infection and to minimize social disruption and economic consequences of COVID-19 outbreak. The AU has so far established a Coronavirus fund with commitments to-date totalling USD20 million. At the national level, most African countries have implemented lockdowns, testing (of suspected cases) and contact tracing.

On the 4th of April 2020, the African Union Development Agency (AUDA-NEPAD) published a White Paper on AUDA-NEPAD Response to COVID-19 and other epidemics. The Paper features five key priorities with an aim of strengthening: health systems; food systems; skills development and employment; education; and national planning and data systems.

As part of AUDA-NEPAD's White Paper, particular focus has been placed on occupational safety and health (OSH) for both frontline health care workers and the working population at large. It is evident that the impact of COVID-19 on the working population is significant, especially the working population that have high exposure risks due to the nature of their work. This cohort includes healthcare workers, laboratory workers, border management teams, those in the food supply, logistics and public transportation industry, death-care workers, and waste management workers, amongst others. Similarly, the pandemic has posed significant risks to other workers, inter alia, increased absenteeism; loss of wages and jobs; loss of man-hours and productivity; increase in medical costs in the face of limited medical insurance cover and social protection; changes in the way of doing business; and interruption of supply chains.

There is, therefore, need for a coordinated response by the AU Member States to minimise the impact of COVID-19 on the working population. Such efforts will, amongst others, promote the efficient and effective deployment of expert support thereby making available technical support and evidence-based guidance and advice on occupational safety and health needs within the realm of AU's COVID-19 response Plan.

It is with the foregoing that AUDA-NEPAD in collaboration with the African Union Commission, the International Labour organisation and other partners have developed the COVID-19/OSH Guidelines for Specific Workplaces. The guidelines covering thematic areas such as Occupational Safety, Health and Wellness of Health Workers and Clinical Occupation Health, serve as key technical reference instruments for all stakeholders, including national and sub-national governments, regional bodies, civil society, academia and development partners, to work in a coordinated and coherent manner in addressing occupational safety and health at workplaces in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic.

It is our sincere hope that the values and imperatives that are framed in the guidelines will inspire all of us to promote occupational safety and health at workplaces as part of the concerted efforts to fight against the effects of the global pandemic and advance the Continent's development agenda encapsulated in Agenda 2063.

**Dr Ibrahim A Mayaki**  
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## Definition Of Terms

**Hazard:** Any situation or condition with a potential to cause harm

**Health worker:** Any person working within a health facility who is either directly involved in patient care or working in support services of the facility such as laundry, kitchen, ground maintenance etc.

**Health care waste/clinical waste:** hazardous waste from health care or other medical facilities that include infectious sharps, pharmaceuticals, soiled linen and other materials that have been contaminated the pathogens, blood of excreta.

**Risk:** The probability of harm being realized.

## Acronyms

HW	Health Workers
OMP	Occupational Medical Practitioner
OSHMS	Occupational Safety and Health Management Systems
OREPs	Occupational Risk Exposure Profiles
OSH	Occupational Safety and Health
TB	Tuberculosis
COVID 19	Coronavirus disease
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
RPE	Respiratory Protective Equipment

## 1. Introduction

Mining activities are an important economic activity. The promotion and maintenance of the safety and health of health workers (HWs) remain paramount during this challenging phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. HWs on the frontline have been the most exposed, with the highest risk of COVID-19 infection. The multiplicity of hazards of COVID-19 beyond just acquiring the infection and experiencing its other related pathophysiological effects is a cause for concern. The hazards include psychosocial, chemical, physical, biological and ergonomics. Concerning psychological responses, these may include low mood, low motivation, exhaustion, anxiety, depression, burnout, and suicidal thoughts. If these are not appropriately assessed and managed, such psychosocial hazards may increase stress levels and lead to physical and mental health problems. Concerns are that the health sector has largely been deficient of a strategic occupational safety and health services for health workers. It is also unique due to a highly hazardous work environment but with limited comprehensive occupational safety and health management systems (OSHMS) beyond infection control. It is key that countries put in place systems that safeguard the safety, health, and wellness of HWs.

## 2. Scope of Application

These guidelines apply to all health workers who are involved in managing COVID 19.

## 3. Purpose

The purpose of this guideline is to:

- Outline a comprehensive OSHMS for health workers.
- Describe the key principles and processes of safeguarding wellness of health workers.
- Define a performance management system to monitor the safety and health of health workers.
- Give guidance on the principles of risk assessment in health facilities.

## 4. Elements of a Management System

### Planning, Responsibility, and accountability

It is essential that the approach to the maintenance and promotion of HW' well-being is planned and the responsibility and accountability for this should rest at the highest levels of national and organizational levels. Generally, the accountabilities

and responsibilities should be premised around the following key elements.

- National policy or legislation and organizational policies that address the occupational safety and health of HW.
- National and organizational policies specific to HW that commit to:
  - » Provision of resources in time, budget, and support.
  - » Development of risk assessments and management strategies that encompass all key hazards in the workplace inclusive of
    - Psychosocial hazards
    - Ergonomic hazards
    - Physical hazards
    - Chemical hazards
    - Biological hazards (including COVID-19)
  - » The conduct of hazard identification and risk assessments as well as key risk control strategies of elimination, substitution, engineering, administrative, and PPE.
  - » On-going education and training of HWs on safety and health.
  - » Incorporation of safety and health principles in the procurement of all products to be used at health institutions.
  - » On-going performance monitoring and evaluation of the OSH management system.
- Visible and felt occupational safety and health leadership.
- A clear commitment to the welfare of HWs should be demonstrable across all levels of management.
- All health institutions must ensure that they have a documented, implemented, and effective program addressing the safety and health of HWs.
- Safety and health issues should incorporate into position/ job descriptions of HWs.
- Consultative arrangements.
- Consultative arrangements are an integral component of any OSHMS. This relates to the broad worker participatory approach in conjunction with health and safety representatives as well as joint occupational health and safety committees. The consultation of workers in OSH issues should ensure that:
  - HWs are consulted and involved in all matters of OSH relating to their health and well-being recognised structures such as safety and health committees as well as worker representatives.



- All activities concerned with matters of occupational hazards should be done in collaboration and involvement of HWs.
- HWs should through the recognised structures participate in the procurement of materials for use such as PPE & RPE in the institutions to ensure that issues of OSH are incorporated into such activities.
- There should be compliance with all laid down policies and procedures relating to OSH.

### Specific Program Elements

Several important elements of an OSHMS will ensure that HWs are protected from COVID 19 and other workplace risks. These include risk management, training and education, procurement, medical surveillance, and fitness for duty.

### Risk Management

Health institutions should put in place documented policies specific to COVID 19 and other workplace risks. The healthcare institutions are hazardous working environments and the multiplicity of occupational risks makes it mandatory to have systems and processes in place to deal with such risks. The direct effects of COVID 19 and its indirect effects such as mental health, ergonomics, chemicals, biological and physical hazards should be comprehensively managed at healthcare institutions. Some of the important considerations for HW protection at workplaces include the following:

- A hazard identification and risk assessment system or matrix (See annexure 1)
- A written program for the management of all workplace risks.
- Profiling of all hazards beyond infection control across all work areas.
- The profiling of hazards should also include mental health issues and should consider the following areas:
  - » Workload, work pace and work schedule
  - » Workplace violence or victimization
  - » Work-life balance
  - » Job security
  - » Social and psychological support
- Occupational risk exposure profiles (OREPS) for HW that are documented and available to all employees.
- A risk management plan for all the major hazard categories, i.e. physical, chemical, psychological, ergonomics and biological.



- A risk control framework that incorporates, elimination, substitution, engineering and administrative controls, and PPE.
- A monitoring and evaluation framework for their OSH programs.

### Training and Education in OSH

On-going training and education in OSH and COVID 19 should be prioritized for HW. The fundamental aims of training are to:

- Ensure that workers have the skills to follow safety and health procedures and perform their work safely.
- Increase the employees' awareness of hazards at work and ingrain a safety and health culture in the work environment.
  - » Training of HWs in OSH issues should include the following key issues:
    - Fundamentals of the risks associated with the main classes of hazards.
    - Basic concepts of hazard identification and risk assessments.
    - Control of occupational hazards with emphasis on the hierarchy of controls.

- Monitoring and review of the health institutions OSHMS performance.
- OSH responsibilities of employers and workers.

### Wellness Programs

Healthcare institutions should prioritize the safety, health, and wellness of HWs. Healthcare institutions should develop, implement, and monitor wellness programs, consisting of:

- A wellness policy that commits management in collaboration and participation of HWs, to taking care of the wellness of staff.
- Included in the services provided as listed below should be COVID -19 specific services:
  - » Blood pressure monitoring
  - » Cholesterol and lipid profiles
  - » Body mass indices
  - » General health evaluations
  - » Physical fitness programs
  - » Stress and Fatigue management program
  - » Counselling programs
  - » Drug and substance abuse management programs.
  - » Employee Assistance Programs
  - » Hepatitis B immunization program
  - » Regular TB screening program
  - » COVID-19 Screening and assessments
  - » Psychosocial risks evaluation

### Medical surveillance

It is prudent to ensure that on-going medical evaluations, employee health data collation, analysis and interpretation be carried out during the pandemic as described hereunder. This should include:

- Risk-based medical examinations for all HWs.
- Medical evaluations based on the healthcare institution's occupational risk exposure profile.
- Preplacement medical evaluations
- Periodic and out of cycle medical examinations should be done on regular intervals, annually or biennially.
- Exit medical evaluations for staff e leaving employment.

### COVID 19 Specific Surveillance

For COVID 19 surveillance of health workers please refer to the AUDA-NEPAD Clinical Occupational health guidelines

### Procurement in Healthcare

Procurement at health care facilities during the pandemic should allow for specific considerations to assist in the prevention of the spread of COVID 19 at facilities.

### Clinical Waste management

During the pandemic Healthcare institutions should consider the following in relation to health care waste:

- Have a clinical/ health waste management policy.
- Implementing a clinical waste management program that seeks to address waste at the source of generation, transportation, and disposal.
- Establishing systems and processes for dealing with reporting of incidents and near misses with regards to waste spillages and exposures to HWs.

## 5. Key Documents

- WHO website and related guidance documents
- CDC Website and related guidance documents
- NIOH website and guidance documents
- AUDA-NEPAD Guidelines on Risk Management

Thank you to all our partners for making this project a success





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