

## **SOM Newsletter, May 2020**

### **Introduction by SOM President, Dr Will Ponsonby**

I am now in my last few weeks of my term as SOM President and, as with predecessors, here is a reflection on my year in office. Obviously for all of us, this last year will be dominated by COVID-19 and the changes it has brought to our working and personal lives.

This has been a major health emergency which has had significant occupational challenges. It has demonstrated some of the flaws and deficiencies in the way we manage occupational health in the UK. It has, however, presented us with a great opportunity to demonstrate the utility of occupational health in society and call for universal access to occupational health.

The SOM Council has met weekly for the past two months, to discuss emerging issues and to allow feedback to the executive team. The wisdom of the Council has guided decisions and actions. I would like to thank Dr Rick Taylor who is stepping down as Council Chair, for his dedication over the years. I would like to welcome Dr Vicky Mason as the new Council Chair.

When the pandemic started, we had to adapt quickly to an evolving situation, providing advice to members and organisations we support. Colleagues in the NHS had to prepare for the challenges of working with COVID-19 patients and implement safe systems of work, ensuring the right PPE in terms of type and quality, and who should be wearing what. SOM worked with colleagues in BOHS and IOM to provide guidance not only on the type of PPE required but to highlight the need for fit testing and training for all staff. We wrote to Matt Hancock and Sarah Alban (HSE CEO) to raise these issues. We also worked with colleagues in the RCN to raise the issues of controls in the Care Sector.

Testing for COVID-19 is also an issue, with questions on types of testing and when they should be used. Working with the OH commercial providers group, we published guidelines on testing and the ethics. We also inputted into a new fast track procurement system for the NHS to contract with commercial providers.

SOM has hosted a multi-disciplinary group which meets weekly to discuss issues and to agree a joint approach. There has been successful work done on PPE, Fitness for Work, Psychological Health, and development of the Return to Work toolkit. We also have regular meetings with HSE, where they brief us on current issues, and we can question them and raise concerns.

More recently SOM has been working with Acas, BITC, CIPD and Mind to produce a toolkit for return to work. I would like to thank everyone involved with this effort. As we can see from the News, there are challenges in reassuring workers that it is safe to return to the workplace. OH professionals will have an ongoing role in identifying those who are vulnerable, who may need extra adjustments.

It was not all about COVID-19; the first eight months as President were rather calmer and we made steady progress. Following a budget deficit in 2018, we made decisive changes which resulted in a surplus in 2019. Membership grew also in 2019, and we are pleased to announce most members have already renewed in 2020. We also agreed and published the new SOM strategy. I would like to thank Nick Pahl, CEO, and the SOM team for all their hard work over the last year. None of this would have been possible without them.

Unfortunately, the Conference has been postponed to 2021, but I hope to meet many of you then. The AGM will be held virtually on 24th June - all members are welcome. I look forward to supporting Professor Anne Harriss as SOM President for the 2020-21 term.