

Noise Induced Hearing Loss Speech: Mr Paul Dunne

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, dis baie koud vir more!

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about a critical and enduring challenge facing not just our industry, but thousands of employees around the world, Noise-Induced Hearing Loss.

Nowhere is this issue more pressing than in the South African mining sector, where Hearing Loss remains one of the most pervasive occupational health hazards. Research indicates that up to 73% of South African mine workers may suffer to some degree by the time they retire. This is more than just a statistic, it's a stark reminder of the conditions many of our colleagues face daily.

But this challenge isn't uniquely South African. Around the world, from Australia to the United States, Canada to Chile, mining people are also exposed to harmful noise levels. The difference lies not in the existence of noise, but in how it's managed.

In some of these countries, proactive investment in modern equipment, rigorous enforcement of regulations related to engineering noise control and hearing protection compliance, and robust early detection programs have dramatically reduced the incidence and impact of Noise-Induced Hearing Loss. They've shown us that change is not only possible, but it's achievable.

Here at home, we are also making a difference. The South African Mining Industry has responded with increasing urgency, particularly through tripartite collaborations and the establishment of milestone targets aimed at curbing Noise-Induced Hearing Loss. At last year's Occupational Health and Safety Summit, we saw an important evolution in our targets: The aspirational equipment and process noise targets were reduced from 107dB(A) to 104dB(A). Perhaps even more significantly, the industry committed to ensuring no new cases of Noise-Induced Hearing loss among previously unexposed employees by 2034. I personally signed those commitments together with Mr Japie Fullard on behalf of the Minerals Council.

Recognising the scale of this commitment, I engaged with the MOSH Noise Team to develop a comprehensive and actionable strategy that could be adopted industry wide. This strategy is built around four core pillars:

- a) Driving the Identification and Adoption of Leading Practices and Research Outcomes
- b) OEM Engagement Strategies
- c) Residual Noise Risk Management; and finally
- d) Acoustic Engineering in Workplace Design

Importantly, this strategy has been endorsed by the CEO Zero Harm Leadership Forum, under Japie's leadership ensuring that it receives both commitment and integration into operational risk management frameworks.

In parallel, the Minerals Council has reviewed its flagship Khumbul' Ekhaya strategy, initially launched in 2019 with a vision of Zero Harm and a safer mining environment. The name, "Khumbul' Ekhaya," meaning "remember home" in isiZulu, reminds us that every employee deserves to return home in the same condition in which they arrived, not just alive, but whole and healthy.

As we revised this strategy, we are placing occupational health and Noise-Induced Hearing Loss in particular at its core.

The principles of leadership commitment, a people-centred approach, and transparent collaboration and communication are foundational to both the Khumbul' Ekhaya strategy and our Noise-Induced Hearing Loss Action Plan. These values must be woven into every thread of our noise risk management efforts.

Allow me to emphasize a crucial point: Noise is an engineering problem. We must bring more engineers into the conversation, tasked not only with problem-solving but with owning the risk. Support for the Industry-Wide “Buy and Maintain Quiet” Initiative should be non-negotiable. We must ensure that every piece of equipment procured is not only fit for purpose, and that it is maintained to those standards throughout its operational life.

Which brings us to the business of today, The Noise Engineering Controls Convention.

Historically, the industry has leaned heavily on Hearing Protection Devices, which still remains crucial in our residual risk management, as a frontline defence. But this is reactive. We must now shift toward proactive, technology-driven solutions those proven in other industries and global contexts. Today's convention will explore Acoustic Engineering, Predictive Modelling, and other cutting-edge technologies in noise control.

The MOSH Noise Team has engaged a range of stakeholders and other industries to identify practical solutions that can be adapted for our context. I urge each of you to participate actively, ask questions, share insights, and take full advantage of the knowledge being shared today.

Mining in South Africa employs 475 000 people, 19% of whom are women. We are one of the foundation stones of the SA economy and we have a very strong economic multiplier and high dependency ratio through extended families and the communities in which we operate. Mining must succeed for South Africa to succeed.

In closing, I would like to remind you that achieving a safer, quieter, and healthier mining environment is not only a regulatory obligation, but a moral imperative. Let's make this more than just a conversation, let's make sure we make a difference.

Thank you and enjoy the day ahead.