

October is Transport Month...

Trucking drives the South African economy and so it is vital that all of those organisations involved in this sector redouble their efforts and drastically scale up comprehensive HIV and AIDS prevention, treatment, support and risk management. With this philosophy in mind, Mercedes-Benz South Africa, has made a concerted effort to assist initiatives to support such preventative programmes. "October is Transport Month, and in this month we reflect on the key figure in the trucking industry – the truck driver.

One can do a market survey and you will find one element that all the brands and related industries have in common, and that is the driver. The driver cannot be automated, and we cannot do without skilled and experienced drivers," says Kobus van Zyl, Vice President, Mercedes-Benz South Africa, Commercial Vehicle division.

"In this month we want to recognize the commercial vehicle drivers for their incredible contribution to the industry, and this is why Mercedes-Benz has made Trucking Wellness a part of its long-term strategy," adds Van Zyl.

The life of a truck driver can be very hard, with gruelling hours, long distances and prolonged loneliness. The trucking industry, faced with the challenges of rising fuel costs, safety and constant driver shortages, now faces an even more severe predicament from the impact of HIV and AIDS, which affects both single and married drivers as well as their sexual partners – and, by extension, their families.

The once stable industry of some 70 000 drivers is now under threat by the impact of poor health and shortened life span of its driving workforce. The effects of HIV and AIDS can be seen in the constant search to replace drivers lost through high absenteeism, disability or death. The result is trucks left standing, reducing earning potential or, worse still, driving once thriving transport companies to closure and inevitable job loss.

MBSA sponsors 'Trucking Wellness', who in turn purchase Sprinter panel vans for adaptation into mobile clinics. Together with a body-builder, Trucking Wellness have fitted these units with 25-litre water tanks and invertors for easy connection to an electricity supply at their various places of operation.

Trucking Wellness, originally known as Trucking Against Aids, was established in 1999 to ensure universal access to quality STI & HIV/AIDS prevention, treatment care and support for truckers, their families and sex workers in the industry. Twenty roadside wellness centres have been established in all provinces along the national trucking routes in South Africa.

The roadside wellness centre consists of modified six-meter containers. One container is fully equipped with medication and staffed by a qualified nursing sister who provides healthcare and counselling to patients suffering from STIs. The second container is equipped for use as an awareness education and training facility.

To date, a total of 388 840 patients have received education at wellness centres. 141 038 patients were treated at the wellness centres, of which 48 573 were specifically treated for STIs.

"Most experts agree that a combination of in-house programmes and roadside clinics

are the best way to reach drivers. Smaller truck operators still need to establish in-house programmes to complement this work. Companies would do well to invest in basic health care and clinical testing. You cannot buy experience, and if the trucks stop, the economy stops," adds Van Zyl.

Tertius Wessels of Trucking Against AIDS says that the fight has but begun. "The growth and continued successful operation of the network of centres has been encouraging as is the financial support received from various sponsors and key industry players."

Wessels said they would have to find ways to balance the need for ensuring an industry that does not discriminate against those affected, but one that also ensures safety for all road users. The bottom line is that government cannot do it alone, especially in the trucking industry. The government depends on industry to move people and goods safely around the country, to self-regulate the industry and make recommendations to government for improvements.

The Trucking Wellness Programme's success is hinged on its complete buy in and integration into industry stakeholders' operations. It is this collaboration of private and public partnerships that solidifies its success, making it sustainable in the long term. The mere fact that the Trucking Wellness Management Board is made up of both unions and employers makes it a remarkable initiative. The programme effectively brings together parties from all sectors of society working together for the betterment of those in the road freight and logistics industry. These partners include government, business, trade unions and civil society (NBCRFI, Sida, Mercedes-Benz, SABCOHA, CareWorks, CMRA, Engen, UTi, Imperial Logistics, National and Provincial Departments of Health, N3TC, RFA, Shell, Satawu, Tawusa, MTWU, PTWU).

"Mercedes-Benz South Africa has been a proud supporter of Trucking Wellness for many years. In 2009 this support was entrenched through a R3.5 million partnership which aims to significantly scale up the work of Trucking Wellness in targeted areas," concludes Van Zyl.

Mercedes-Benz pays tribute to truck drivers



Left from left to right:
Nicolai Berger - Divisional Manager, Mercedes-Benz Vans Division;
Kobus van Zyl - Vice President, Commercial Vehicles, Mercedes-Benz South Africa;
Brad Mears - CEO- SABCOHA - South African Business Coalition On HIV/Aids;
Themba Mthombeni - Operations Director Corridor Empowerment - Trucking Wellness;
Tertius Wessels - Managing Director - Corridor Empowerment - Trucking Wellness;
Mayur Bhana - Marketing Manager, Commercial Vehicles MBSA;
Jan Aichinger - Divisional Manager, Mercedes-Benz Bus & Coach

