

Paraffin is not to blame for everything

By Patrick Kulati

The mood is already changing in South Africa. You can almost touch the festive atmosphere. Airports are clogging up; shopping malls are bursting at the seams and cash registers are ringing, very much against the wishes of the gentlemen at the Reserve Bank. Christmas carols scintillate and populate the air with soothing sounds. In the midst of all this, a glance at the newspapers tells horrific stories of fires in the homes of poor people with a sad regularity. Many are already blaming paraffin for these fires.

Promoting safety, not bad solutions

At the outset, let me make it clear that the Paraffin Safety Association's primary mission is to promote safety in the use of household energy, focusing on paraffin safety. We are not in the business of promoting paraffin as a product. However, it is becoming increasingly clear to me that paraffin has been wrongly blamed as the cause of all the fires that happen in the households. Hence we have heard simplistic proposals of banning it from the energy mix. Some have even questioned a need for a Household Energy Strategy that includes paraffin. The idea seems to be that once you electrify every household, everybody will simply stop using paraffin and other alternative energy sources. But, as much we would all like to believe that that is true, these are simplistic and unrealistic propositions which have no basis in fact. Real life tells a different story.

Real facts

The majority of low income household energy users in South Africa use paraffin. The overwhelming majority of these are the poorest of the poor. Evidence shows that some of the poor people continue to use paraffin, even when they live in electrified RDP housing. People believe that electricity and gas are more expensive for their thermal needs. For example, they use paraffin primarily to cook and warm their houses. Paraffin can and does meet people's thermal needs. The issue, as with all household energy carriers, is safety.

The problem is bigger than paraffin

Last week, on the day of the outbreak of Klepsiella at Prince Mshiyeni Hospital in Umlazi, Durban, a delegation of our Board Members visited Prince Mshiyeni hospital and community. The hospital is one of our surveillance research sites where we collect the information. Our [surveillance research project](#) collects, collates and analyses hospital and clinic data on energy injuries. It continues to show that other energy carriers are responsible for injuries. It indicates that paraffin is not the only contributing energy source to the injuries that people incur. In fact, the largest group of injuries in the project involved electricity.

The nurses told us that many patients present liquid burns, meaning that the burns are caused by the contents on the pot, regardless of whatever energy source was used. We saw a young boy who got burnt by a gel stove, where the gel landed on his body causing third degree burns. Additionally, in many communities, the dangling electricity wires electrocute many people. We have seen newspaper reports of gas related fires. So

clearly there needs to be a concerted effort to promote safety across all household energies. This is why we have been calling for a Household Energy Safety System.

Frustration with the Department of Minerals and Energy

This is where it really gets frustrating working with the Department of Minerals and Energy (DME). We have not heard a thing from the DME, ever since they accepted the **declaration** of community energy needs in September. And now we no longer have any reason to believe that they are serious about household energy safety. Never have I seen such a brazen and blatant disregard for people's consumer rights and voices, as I see in this lack of action.

Safety across all energy sources

Worse still, we hear all sorts of rumours that the government is vacillating back to its old stand that they want to outlaw paraffin. As stated above, we have no interest in promoting the fuel as a product, except its safe usage, but we believe that it will be a terrible and unfortunate mistake to outlaw paraffin at this stage. It will be a simplistic, yet disastrous solution for the majority of the poor users. This, at the time when Eskom is proposing to increase the price of electricity by 18%. This at the time when the inflation keeps rising. Instead of fiddling with unsound policy solutions or options, it is time to promote safety across all energy sources by installing a Household Energy Safety System in our country.