

Truck driver well-being an industry priority

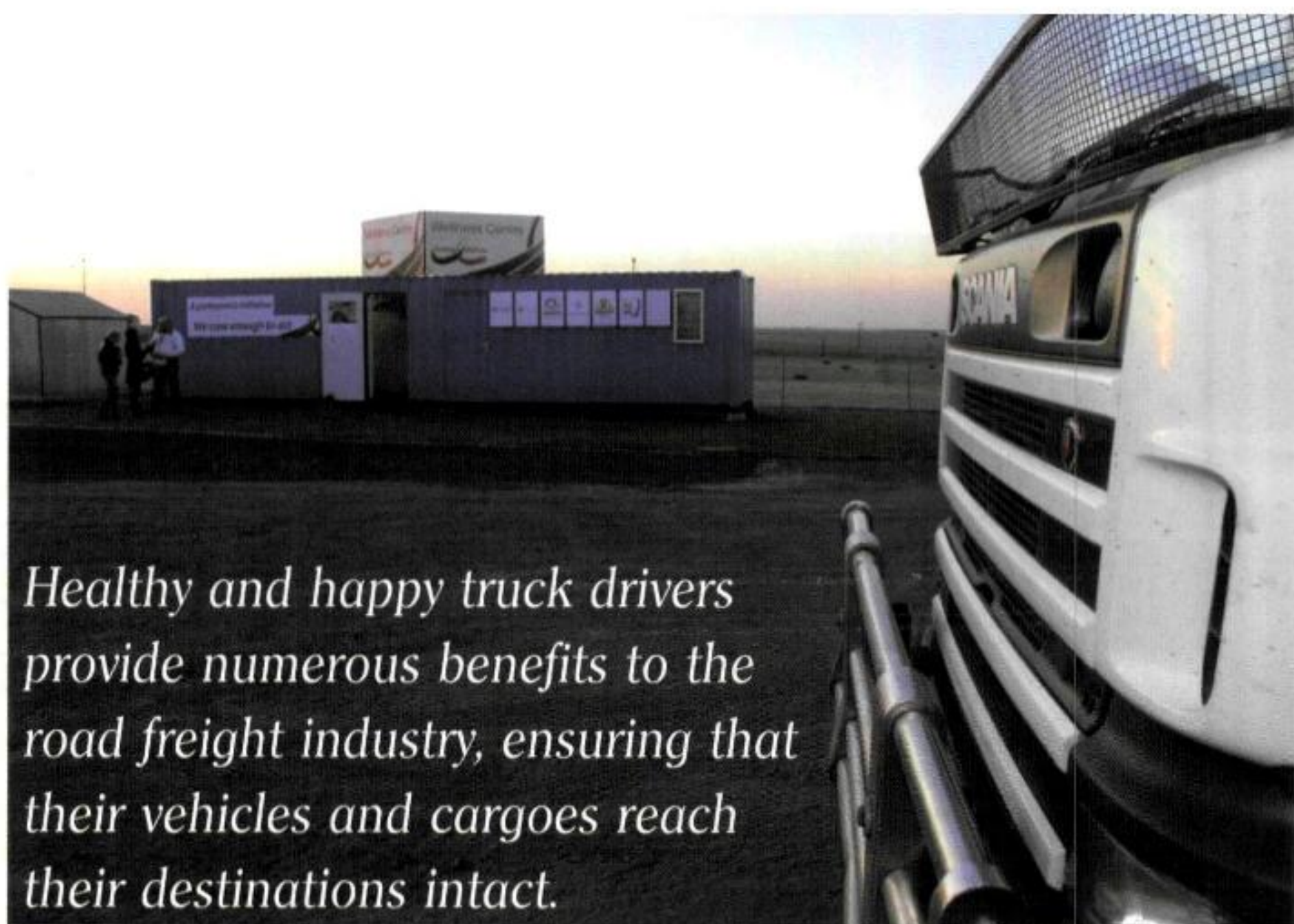
ONE OF THE mechanisms that help to keep truck drivers healthy on South Africa's many major transport routes is the 20 in situ wellness centres and five mobile wellness units strategically located throughout the country.

Most trucking accidents in South Africa are attributed to driver fatigue – a common problem in the industry. However, this is not the only cause. TB, high blood pressure, diabetes, colds and flu, sexually transmitted diseases and HIV-related conditions can contribute to a poor level of health in drivers, which adversely affects their performance. The purpose of Trucking Wellness is to improve the overall health and well-being of the country's drivers and reduce the potential for driver 'downtime' and accidents.

Counselling and treatment

Trucking Wellness started out as a joint project called Trucking against AIDS, which was run by various South African road freight companies, trade unions and the government, and was co-funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). That operation evolved into Trucking Wellness as it is known today. The project is designed to create HIV/Aids and STI awareness among long-distance truck drivers, commercial sex workers and the communities around the various truck stops, as well as to provide the necessary counselling and treatment for these conditions. Managed by the Corridor Empowerment Project (CEP), the Trucking Wellness clinics operate mostly after hours and at night, and offer a number of services to drivers free of charge and in a safe and confidential environment.

Most of the comfortable and homely clinics are built into specially adapted 12 m freight containers, each staffed by a



Healthy and happy truck drivers provide numerous benefits to the road freight industry, ensuring that their vehicles and cargoes reach their destinations intact.

professional nurse and coordinator, where drivers can receive treatment for a variety of health problems, from backache and flu to high blood pressure. More importantly, drivers are encouraged to be counselled and tested for HIV/Aids and other sexually transmitted infections. CareWorks, the treatment service provider, offers confidential counselling, pathology tests and, if necessary, appropriate antiretroviral treatment for HIV-positive drivers through the Wellness Fund. Since the project was launched by the National Bargaining Council for the Road Freight Industry (NBCRFI) in 1999, the clinic services have expanded to provide education, primary healthcare, food supplements, condom distribution and voluntary HIV testing, as well as referral to CareWorks.

Con Roux, commercial manager for the N3 Toll Concession, which is also involved with Trucking Wellness, has seen an interesting trend. "Many insurance companies are coming on board because it is in their financial interest to make sure that truck drivers are healthy. One trucking accident can cost millions, and ultimately someone has to pay up: in most cases it's the insurers. Ultimately, it really is in everyone's interest to make sure that this project succeeds."

Social responsibility

Roux emphasises the social responsibility element expected of trucking companies with regard to the quality of life of their drivers, as well as other road users who are negatively affected by accidents. "There is definitely a moral high ground to be taken here," he says. "The consequences of the ill health of drivers are a major national problem for the industry. By getting involved in Trucking Wellness, a transport operator is strides ahead of its competitors in terms of social responsibility.

"Brand awareness is vitally important in this industry, and companies are starting to realise the value of being recognised as an organisation that cares enough about its employees to make their wellness a priority," says Roux.

Magretia Brown, labour relations manager for the Road Freight Association, says, "Trucking Wellness results in healthy employees, a prolonged employment relationship and increased productivity, which in turn has a positive effect on the overall performance of the business and the South African economy. It also provides for a healthy individual, with an enhanced personal and family life."

Driver well-being is obviously a primary focus in this industry, because drivers play such an important role. However, many other employees are also relied on in this industry, and as such the programmes are managed in such a way that they can reach and serve any employee within the industry. Trucking Wellness provides the ideal solution to a growing issue, at no cost to the companies themselves. The clinic services are free to the drivers (and anyone else who might need them), so companies can address the well-being of their drivers free from financial repercussions. **35**