Estimating the burden of disease attributable to ambient air pollution (ambient PM$_{2.5}$ and ambient ozone) in South Africa for 2000, 2006 and 2012

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Background. Globally, a growing body of research has shown that ambient air pollution is one of the most critical environmental issues, especially in relation to human health. Exposure to ambient air pollution leads to serious health conditions such as lower respiratory infections, cancers, diabetes mellitus type 2, ischaemic heart disease, stroke and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

Objectives. To estimate the burden of disease attributable to ambient air pollution in South Africa (SA) for the years 2000, 2006 and 2012.

Methods. Comparative risk assessment method was used to determine the burden of disease due to two pollutants (particulate matter (PM$_{2.5}$) and ambient ozone). Regionally optimised fully coupled climate chemistry models and surface air pollution observations were used to generate concentrations of PM$_{2.5}$ and ozone for each SA Census Small Area Level, for the year 2012. For 2000 and 2006, population-weighted PM$_{2.5}$ and ozone were estimated, based on the 2012 results. Following the identification of disease outcomes associated with particulate matter with aerodynamic diameter <2.5 μm (PM$_{2.5}$) and ozone exposure, the attributable burden of disease was estimated for 2000, 2006 and 2012. Furthermore, for the year 2012, the burden of disease attributable to ambient air pollution exposure was computed at provincial levels.

Results. In 2012, approximately 97.6% of people in SA were exposed to PM$_{2.5}$ at levels above the 2005 World Health Organization guideline: 10 μg/m³ annual mean. From 2000 to 2012, population-weighted annual average PM$_{2.5}$ increased from 26.6 μg/m³ to 29.7 μg/m³, and ozone 6-month high 8-hour daily maximum increased from 64.4 parts per billion (ppb) to 72.1 ppb. At a national scale, in the year 2000, 15 619 (95% uncertainty interval (UI) 8 958 - 21 849) deaths were attributed to PM$_{2.5}$ exposure, while 1 326 (95% UI 534 - 1 885) deaths were attributed to ozone. In 2006, an estimated 19 672 deaths (95% UI 11 526 - 27 086) were attributed to PM$_{2.5}$, and a further 1 591 deaths (95% UI 651 - 2 236) to ozone exposure. In 2012, deaths attributed to PM$_{2.5}$ were 19 507 (95% UI 11 318 - 27 111), and to ozone 1 734 (95% UI 727 - 2 399). Additionally, population-weighted provincial scale analysis showed that Gauteng Province had the highest number of attributable deaths due to both PM$_{2.5}$ and ozone in 2012.

Conclusion. The study showed that ambient air pollution exposure is an important health risk in SA, requiring both short- and long-term intervention. In the short term, the SA Ambient Air Quality Standards and industrial minimum emissions standards need to be enforced. In the longer term, to reduce air pollution and the associated disease burden, the combustion of fossil fuels as a source of energy for power generation and transportation, as well as industrial and domestic uses, needs to be replaced with clean renewable energy sources. In addition to local measures, when the southern African prevalent anticyclonic air dynamics that transport regionally emitted pollutants into SA (especially from biomass burning) are considered, it is also advisable to establish long-term regional co-operation in reducing air pollution.

The article in context
The South African Comparative Risk Assessment Study 2000 (SACRA1) calculated the burden of disease due to outdoor air pollution in selected urban areas in SA for the year 2000. It assessed the attributable burden for three diseases, namely cardiopulmonary disease, lung cancer and acute respiratory infections (in children). The population-weighted particulate matter with aerodynamic diameter <2.5 μm (PM$_{2.5}$) concentration was estimated to be 26.6 μg/m³ in selected urban areas, leading to 4 637 deaths or 0.9% (95% uncertainty interval (UI) 0.3 - 1.5) of all deaths in the country in 2000.

Added value of this study. The present study used updated methods to estimate the burden of disease due to ambient air pollution in SA for 2000, 2006 and 2012. $PM_{2.5}$ and ozone were chosen as the main indicators of ambient air pollution, and their concentrations were computed at SA Census Small Area Level using an aggregated approach that combined a regionally optimised fully coupled climate chemistry model and air pollution observations. Besides computing exposure at a higher resolution, this study also used death data from the second SA National Burden of Disease Study (SANBD2). For diseases attributable to $PM_{2.5}$ exposure, relative risks were generated from integrated exposure response relative risk curves for lower respiratory infections (LRIs), trachea, bronchus and lung cancers, diabetes mellitus type 2, ischaemic heart disease (IHD), stroke and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). For both $PM_{2.5}$ and ozone, population-attributable fractions (PAFs) were computed at a high resolution. Following these, the burden of disease attributable to ambient air pollution exposure was analysed and presented at both national and provincial scales.

Implications of the available evidence. There is a significant burden of disease due to ambient air pollution in SA. Efforts are needed to reduce harmful concentrations of ambient air pollution in the country. In the short term, proactive enforcement of air quality regulations and emissions standards is needed, while in the long term, the country needs to employ alternative strategies to eliminate reliance on fossil fuels, to ensure industrial and domestic energy needs are met in an environmentally sustainable manner.

Air pollution is a threat to human health, well-being and sustainable development.[1] Ambient air pollution is associated with significant excess mortality and ill health.[2] In 2019, ambient air pollution was responsible for an estimated 4.5 million deaths worldwide.[3,4] Recent studies show that even short-term exposure to ambient air pollution leads to slight but statistically significant increases in the relative risk of all-cause mortality (from 0.41% - 0.72% increases for different pollutants).[5]

Ambient air pollution comprises a complex mixture of pollutants that includes particulate matter (PM), ozone, carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides, sulphur dioxide, hydrocarbons, lead compounds and others.[6] Generally, fine PM ($PM_{2.5}$ – particulate matter with aerodynamic diameter<2.5 µm) has a variety of both primary and secondary, stationary and mobile sources. Primary $PM_{2.5}$ particles are emitted directly from sources, while secondary $PM_{2.5}$ particles are formed in the atmosphere through the chemical reactions of precursor gaseous pollutants. Usually, fine- and coarse-mode particles are generated by different processes, experience different atmospheric physicochemical transformations and are removed from the atmosphere through different mechanisms.[7] Various combustion activities account for significant sources of anthropogenic gaseous and particulate emissions that lead to the primary and secondary formation of $PM_{2.5}$, whereas emissions from mechanical and non-combustion activities such as mining, construction and agriculture lead to a higher proportion of coarse-mode particles (particles within the size range PM_{10} - $PM_{2.5}$, and PM_{10} (particulate matter <10 µm in aerodynamic diameter).[7] Hence the main anthropogenic sources of $PM_{2.5}$ emissions are mobile sources (exhaust emissions due to the combustion of petrol and diesel in cars and trucks), stationary sources (coal-burning power plants, industrial boilers burning coal and oil, metallurgical plants), the combustion of coal and wood for domestic energy, mechanical grinding during industrial processes and windblown dust off coal and ash stockpiles, mine tailings dumps and aeolian dust.[8-10] Ground-level (ambient) ozone is a secondary pollutant formed in the atmosphere through a complex series of reactions involving volatile organic compounds (VOCs – hydrocarbons, nitrogen oxides (NO_x – nitric oxide (NO) and nitrogen dioxide (NO_2)) and ultraviolet sunlight.[11] Anthropogenic sources contribute to the precursors of ozone formation (NO_x, VOCs).[12] NO_x is produced from combustion sources (power plants, industries, vehicle emissions), and VOCs arise from emissions from vehicles, petroleum industries, solvent utilisation, industrial processes, fuel distribution and biogenic (plant) emissions.[12]

Exposure to ambient air pollution leads to a significant burden of disease.[1] Several studies have focused on the health effects on children[13-17] and adults living close to mines or industrial areas

in SA.[18] Norman *et al.*[19] estimated that 4 637 deaths and 42 000 years of life were lost to outdoor air pollution (specifically $PM_{2.5}$) in urban areas in SA in the year 2000. Compared with PM_{10}, exposure to $PM_{2.5}$ gets more attention because the associated health outcomes are more serious.[20] Larger particles are filtered in the nose and throat, but smaller $PM_{2.5}$ particles may penetrate to the gas exchange regions of the lung. The smallest particles pass the epithelial and subepithelial barriers to affect other organs of the body.[21] $PM_{2.5}$ exposure is associated with the development of many conditions, including LRIs,[22-24] trachea, bronchus and lung cancers,[25] diabetes mellitus type 2, COPD,[25,26] IHD,[27] stroke[27] and adverse birth outcomes[28,29] such as low birthweight, preterm birth and stillbirth. When ambient ozone is inhaled, it is absorbed in the upper respiratory tract and moves into the intrathoracic airways, reaches the lower respiratory tract and dissolves into the epithelial lining fluid.[30] Both short-term and long-term exposure to ozone have been linked to ill-health effects (such as lung function decrements, susceptibility to respiratory tract infections, asthma attacks and COPD)[30] and premature mortality.[5]

Both regionally and globally, the concentrations of fine PM and ambient ozone are indicators of ambient air pollution, and are monitored for regulatory purposes.[1,31] In SA, the National Environmental Management Act No. 39 of 2004[32] governs the standard-setting processes for a range of pollutants. Ambient air quality standards for most pollutants were gazetted in 2009, while the standard for $PM_{2.5}$ was gazetted in 2012.[33,34] The $PM_{2.5}$ annual average standard was 25 µg/m³ in 2012, decreasing to a more protective 20 µg/m³ in 2016. For ambient ozone, the national ambient air quality standard is 61 ppb or 120 µg/m³ for an 8-hour running mean concentration.[35] In 2005, the World Health Organization (WHO) ambient air quality guideline (AQG) recommended an annual mean of 10 µg/m³ for $PM_{2.5}$, and a 100 µg/m³ (51 ppb) 8-hour mean for ozone.[36] In 2021, updated AQGs were released by the WHO where the $PM_{2.5}$ AQG was reduced from 10 to 5 µg/m³ for the annual mean, and for ozone, it was set to a short-term value of 100 µg/m³ 8-hour daily maximum, and a new long-term guideline of 60 µg/m³ 8-hour mean for the seasonal peak value.[31] While the establishment of these ambient air pollution standards was undoubtedly an important step for SA, their enforcement remains tentative.[34] Although every municipality in SA should be monitoring and reporting air quality data to the SA Air Quality Information System (SAAQIS), many are not doing so,[34] contributing to weak air quality data availability.[37]

Where monitoring data are available, air pollution standards are being exceeded at many sites in SA.[34,38,39] This may be in part due to the country's heavy reliance on its mining, petrochemical and
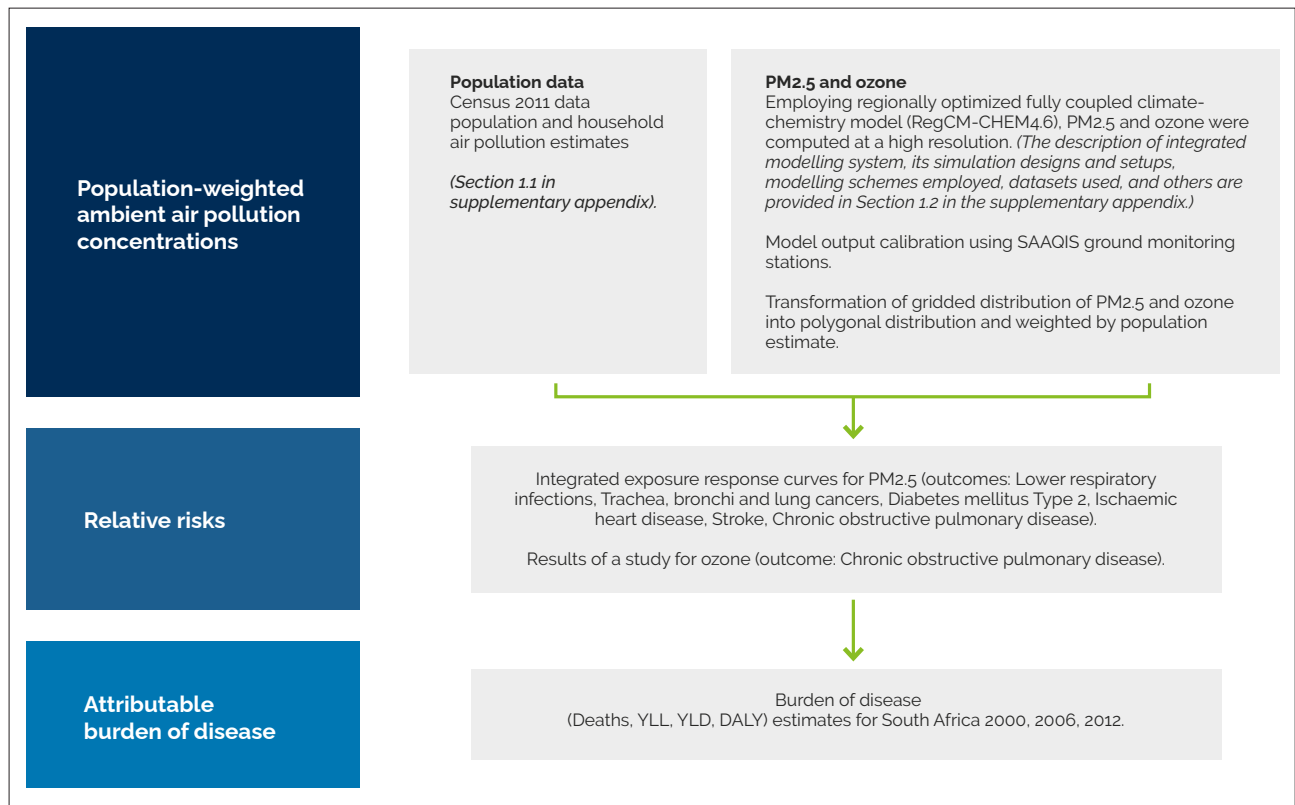
Fig. 1. Data sources for calculating the burden of disease attributable to ambient air pollution (PM$_{2.5}$ and ozone) for 2012. (HAP = household air pollution; SAAQIS = South African Air Quality Information System; YLL = year of life lost, YLD = year of life lived with a disability, DALY = disability-adjusted life year.)

metallurgical industries, along with poorly regulated coal-fired power stations,[42] with coal being used to generate 82% of the country's electricity.[41] These activities affect the region,[42] especially in hotspot locations (priority areas) such as the Vaal Triangle Airshed Priority Area, the Highveld Priority Area and the Waterberg-Bojanala Priority Area. These regions are considered priority areas because of emissions from industrial activities such as mining, electricity production, industrial activities and domestic solid-fuel burning resulting in widespread exceedances of ambient air quality standards.[43-46] At an individual level, it is difficult to control the quality of the ambient air we breathe, but government regulation and enforcement of air quality and source emission standards can play a pivotal role in reducing the burden of disease caused by exposure to ambient air pollution. To generate evidence to inform the reduction and management of ambient air pollution and its health impacts, this study aimed to estimate the burden of disease attributable to ambient air pollution (PM$_{2.5}$ and ozone) for the years 2000, 2006 and 2012.

Methods

This study used comparative risk assessment methodology[47] to estimate the burden of disease attributable to ambient air pollution using the counterfactual scenario of the theoretical minimum risk exposure level (TMREL). Calculating the burden of disease entailed computing the concentrations of PM$_{2.5}$ and ozone, identifying health outcomes and calculating the PAFs (Fig. 1).

Following the Global Burden of Diseases, Injuries, and Risk Factors Study 2017 (GBD 2017)[48] approach, the health risks from ozone and PM$_{2.5}$ were calculated separately. The study also made the assumption that the entire population was exposed to ozone.

For PM$_{2.5}$, it was assumed that in each SA Census Small Area Level (SAL), the proportion of the population not using solid fuels is exposed to PM$_{2.5}$ at the modelled ambient concentration, and that the proportion using solid fuels is exposed at a higher exposure level applicable to households using solid fuels for cooking (household air pollution (HAP)). The PM$_{2.5}$ disease burden due to HAP is reported separately,[49] thereby ensuring that the PM$_{2.5}$ risks for the entire population are accounted for.

Exposure definitions

Consistent with the GBD 2017[48] definitions, exposure to PM$_{2.5}$ was defined as the annual average exposure to outdoor air concentrations of PM$_{2.5}$. Similarly, following GBD 2017, exposure to ozone was defined as the mean of the 6-month period with highest mean 8-hour daily maximum ozone concentrations (July - December 2012), henceforth abbreviated to 6-mo-high-8h-daily-max.[48]

Estimating exposure to PM$_{2.5}$ and ozone in SA for 2012
Online integrated climate chemistry model

Computational advances have allowed for the two-way interactive coupling of atmospheric chemistry with various static and dynamic components of the climate system.[49,50] These advanced numerical modelling systems are known as fully coupled or 'online integrated' climate chemistry models.[50,51] Despite their computational demands, fully coupled climate chemistry models become crucial tools for addressing the issues of atmospheric composition, as well as climate chemistry interactions.[50,51] Rather than coarse-resolution global-scale models, online integrated regional models are known to deploy sub-grid scale model physics, locally resolved dynamical

information, atmospheric physicochemical processes and so on.[50,51] Hence fine-scale regional models allow the generation of more realistic small-scale climate information, chemical processes and patterns at a higher resolution than the global-scale models.[52]

Accordingly, to model the concentration and spatiotemporal distributions of $PM_{2.5}$ and ozone for the whole of SA (section 1.1 in appendix: https://www.samedical.org/file/1810) at a higher resolution for the year 2012, the present study deployed the

International Center for Theoretical Physics fully coupled regional climate chemistry model (RegCM-CHEM4.6).[53] Previous studies have shown the regional optimisation and capabilities of RegCM-CHEM in reproducing the state of the atmosphere (both meteorology and chemistry) over southern Africa.[53-55] A detailed description of the RegCM-CHEM modelling system, simulation set-ups, modelling schemes employed and datasets used are provided in section 1.2 of the appendix. The model outputs were calibrated using SAAQIS ground monitoring data.

Ground monitoring station data
Ground-based air quality observations were used to compare and correct modelled surface concentration of $PM_{2.5}$ and ozone. Hourly observations of $PM_{2.5}$ and ozone were obtained from SAAQIS. During the analysis, there were 62 PM- and 38 ozone-monitoring stations that reported to SAAQIS (section 1.3 in appendix). However, after applying multi-data quality screening criteria, this study used 46 PM and 31 ozone sites (additional details available in appendix
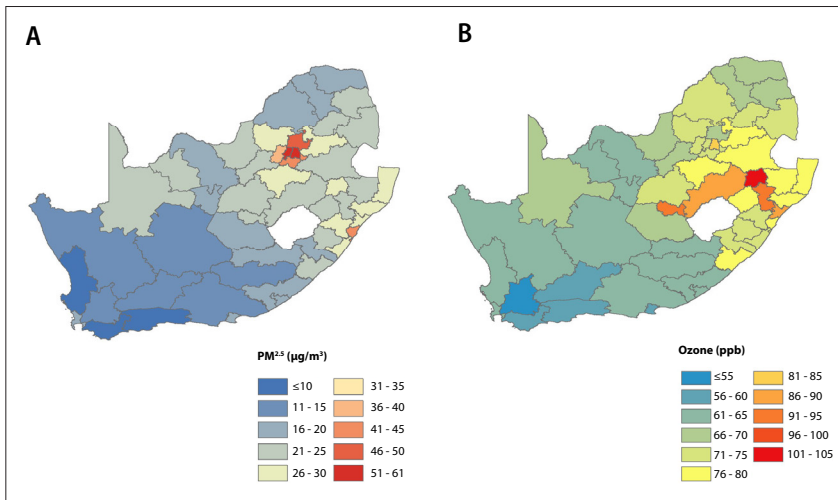
Fig. 2. Population-weighted (A) annual mean concentration of $PM_{2.5}$ ($\mu g/m^3$), (B) mean of the 6-month period with highest mean 8-hour daily maximum ozone concentrations ambient ozone concentrations (ppb), at district scale in South Africa for 2012.
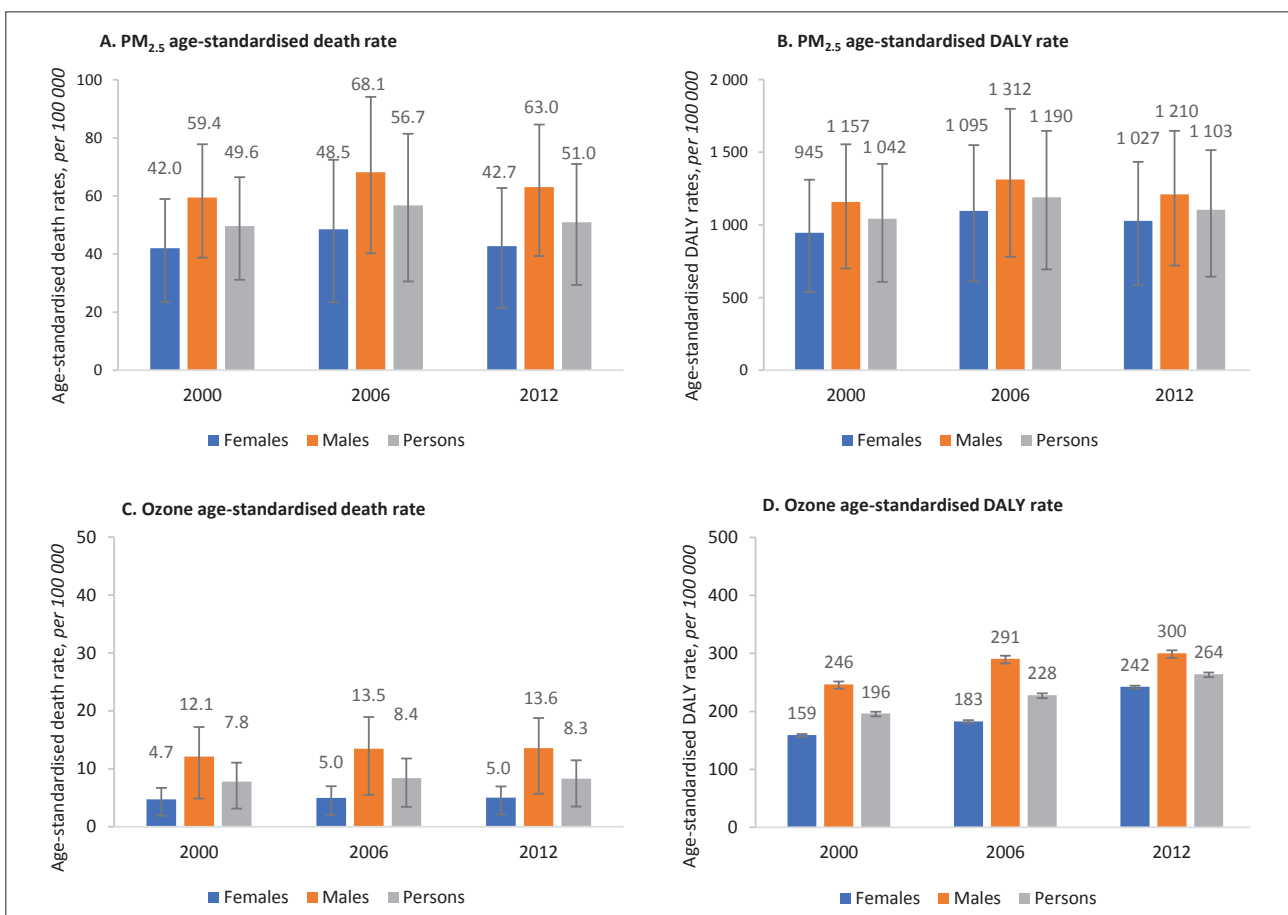
Fig. 3. $PM_{2.5}$ age-standardised (A) death and (B) disability-adjusted life year (DALY) rates per 100 000 population. Ambient ozone age-standardised (C) death and (D) DALY rates per 100 000 population. (All graphs exhibit the national outcomes for South Africa for 2000, 2006 and 2012.)
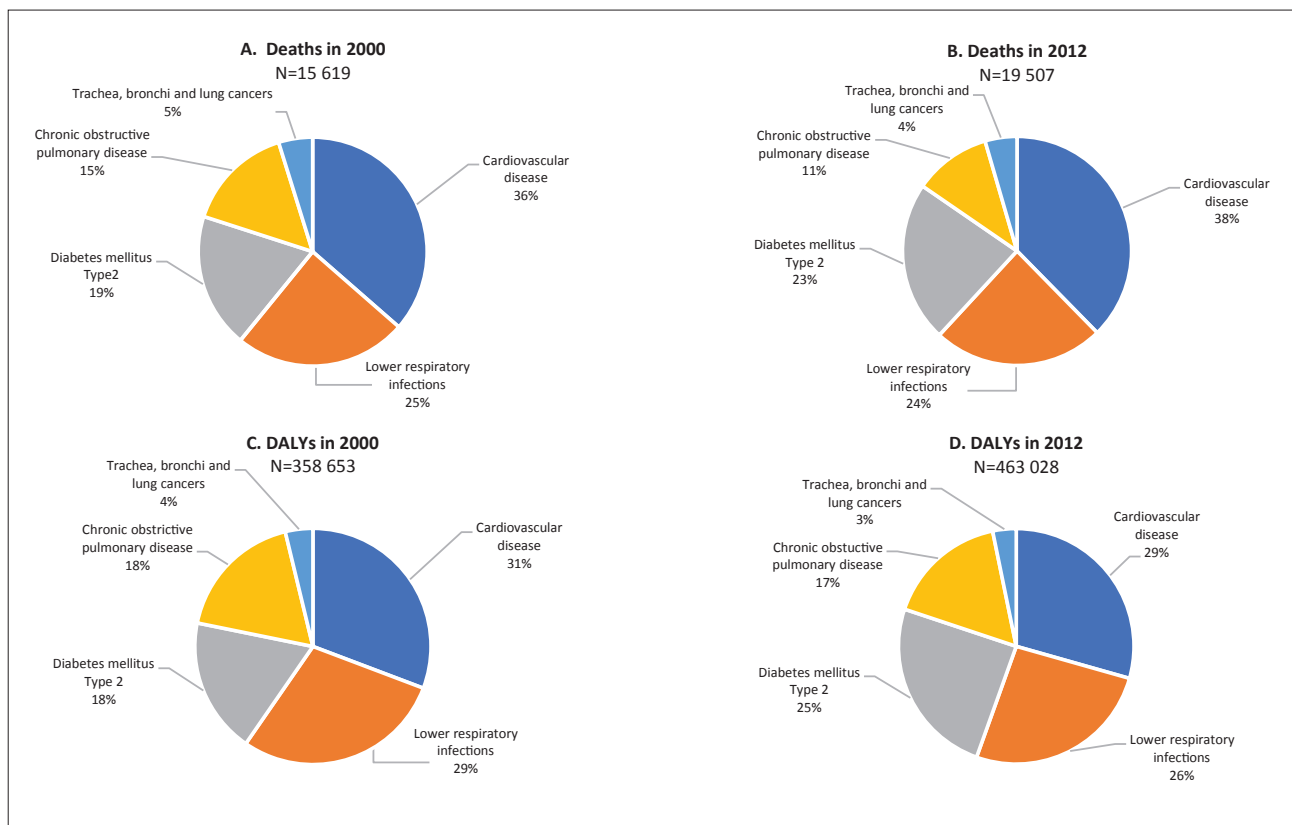
Fig. 4. Deaths attributable to PM_{2.5} by disease condition for (A) 2000 and (B) 2012. Disability-adjusted life years (DALYs) attributable to PM_{2.5} by disease condition for (C) 2000 and (D) 2012. (Cardiovascular disease is the addition of ischaemic heart disease and stroke. Lower respiratory tract infections were a disease outcome for all ages.)

Fig. S5, and Tables S3 and S4: https://www.samedical.org/file/1810). The multi-data quality screening criteria applied in this study are: (*i*) exclusion of data points that exhibited values outside the minimum (i.e. <3 $\mu g/m^3$ for $PM_{2.5}$ and <1 ppb for ozone) and maximum (i.e. >500 $\mu g/m^3$ for $PM_{2.5}$ and >350 ppb for ozone) concentration thresholds; (*ii*) for $PM_{2.5}$, over monitoring stations that report both $PM_{2.5}$ and PM_{10}, if the $PM_{2.5}$ levels reported exceed concurrent co-located PM_{10} levels as well as if the station registers the same concentrations for 3 or more consecutive hours, those $PM_{2.5}$ data points are omitted; (*iii*) after applying the aforementioned criteria, stations with a valid data recovery efficiency with a benchmark of 75% were used. In 2012, among the total stations that reported PM parameters to SAAQIS, 21 monitoring stations reported both $PM_{2.5}$ and PM_{10} (14 sites with valid data points), and the remaining 41 stations (32 sites with valid data points) reported only PM_{10} (appendix Fig. S6). For sites only reporting PM_{10}, their $PM_{2.5}$ values were estimated following the approach detailed in section 1.3 in the appendix.

Most of the observational stations that reported to SAAQIS are concentrated in the northern and eastern parts of the country, where anthropogenic sectors (e.g. urban, residential, biomass burning and industrial activities), as well as population density, are higher (appendix Fig. S3: https://www.samedical.org/file/1810). This provided the opportunity to produce optimal bias-corrected values of $PM_{2.5}$ and ozone, throughout industrially active and densely populated areas of SA.

Model calibration
The initial comparison of modelled hourly values with quality-controlled observations from SAAQIS showed that the model adequately captured both the magnitude and spatiotemporal distributions of $PM_{2.5}$ and ozone. However, to enhance the quality of

modelled values and ensure their reliable applicability for regional exposure studies, quantile mapping-based bias correction was performed.[56,57] Region of influence-specified quantile functions were constructed in order to transform modelled outputs into quality-controlled hourly observations of $PM_{2.5}$ (over 46 sites: appendix Fig. S5A: https://www.samedical.org/file/1810) and ozone (over 31 sites: appendix Fig. S5B), for the entire year of 2012. The quantile transformation functions were applied within their region of influence in terrestrial parts of SA to generate bias-corrected $PM_{2.5}$ and ozone distributions. Afterwards, at the local scale, bias-corrected $PM_{2.5}$ and ozone were compared with observations of individual sites. The comparison showed the bias-corrected 8-hour running average ozone annual mean bias (AMB) is within the range of ~−2.2 - 2.9 ppb, while over 91% of the stations' ozone AMBs are within the range of ~−0.04 - 0.59 ppb. Also, for the $PM_{2.5}$, the AMBs are within the range of ~−2.8 - 3.4 $\mu g/m^3$, with over 87% of the stations' $PM_{2.5}$ AMBs within the range of ~−0.91 - 0.5 $\mu g/m^3$. Further information on monitoring sites and statistics are tabulated in appendix Tables S3 and S4 (https://www.samedical.org/file/1810).

Polygonal transformation
For exposure analysis, the bias-corrected gridded distribution of $PM_{2.5}$ and ozone were transferred into a polygonal distribution based on the population census 2011 SAL polygons from Statistics SA.[58] The transformation of gridded to polygonal distribution was performed using a polygonal size-dependent multi-grid point weighted average matrix. To verify the transformation accuracy, the gridded values were interpolated into the centroid of each of the polygons and compared with the corresponding polygonal values of ozone and $PM_{2.5}$. The transformation analysis showed
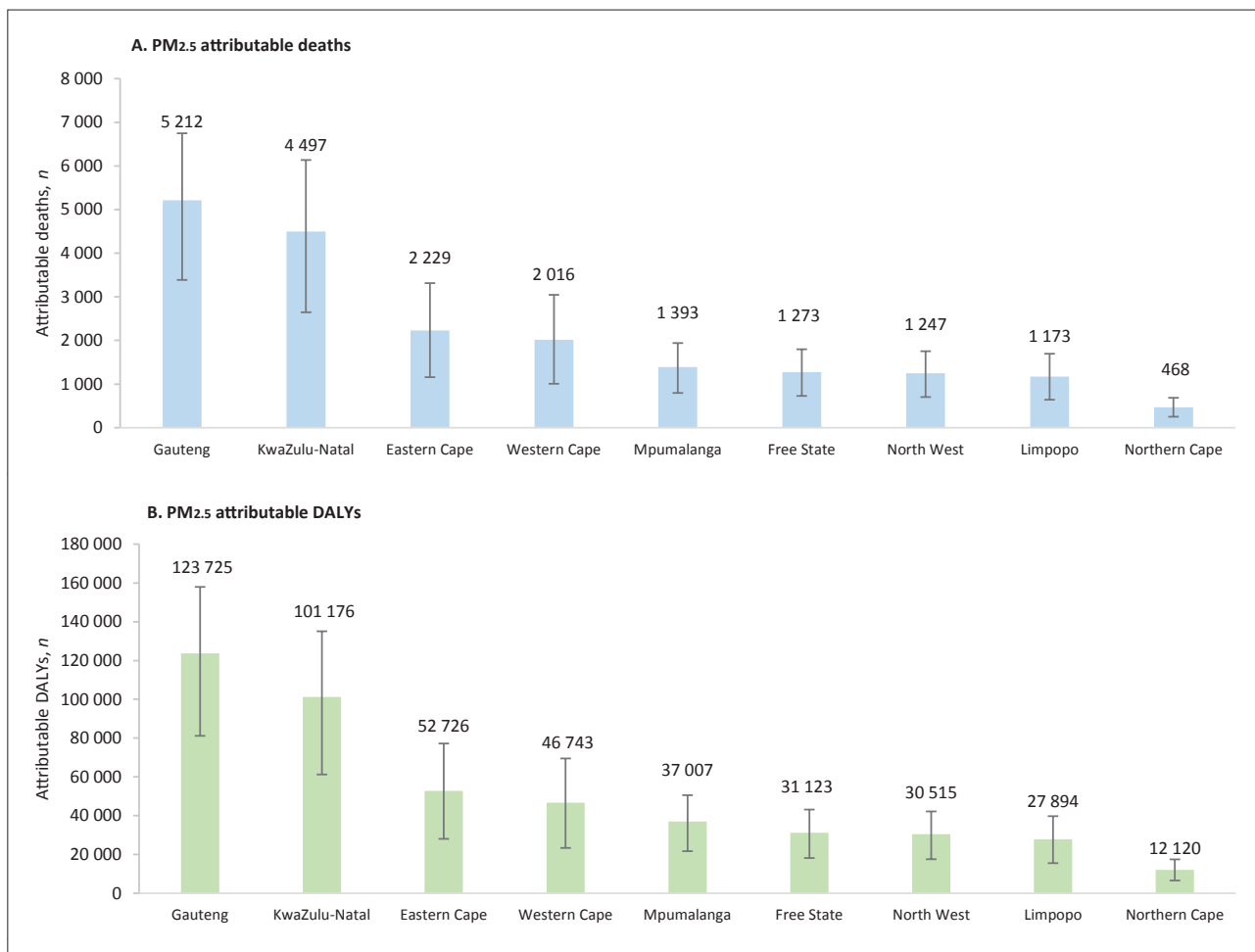
Fig. 5. PM$_{2.5}$ attributable (A) deaths and (B) disability-adjusted life years (DALYs) by province for 2012.

99.6% and 99.2% of polygonal values have less than 1 ppb of ozone and 1 μg/m³ of PM$_{2.5}$ absolute difference, respectively, when compared with the gridded values that are interpolated into the centroid of each of the polygons.

Adjustment for HAP
Although HAP and ambient air pollution are related, since both are indexed against annual PM$_{2.5}$ exposure, we analysed the disease burden due to these risk factors separately. To estimate total PM$_{2.5}$ risks and burden of disease, we assumed in each SAL that modelled ambient concentrations applied to the total population minus the population exposed to HAP. The estimates of HAP due to cooking with solid fuels were made using the Census 2011 data.[58]

Population weighting air pollution estimates
After mapping the calibrated PM$_{2.5}$ and ozone concentrations onto 90 271 SAL polygons of the SA Census 2011, the shape files were exported into Excel (Microsoft Corp., USA). The exported files contained PM$_{2.5}$ and ozone concentrations for each SAL and their corresponding small-area geographical information. The national and provincial population-weighted average values were computed based on the SAL values within their respective boundaries.

The population-weighted PM$_{2.5}$ and ozone concentrations were calculated using ArcGIS software (ArcGIS, USA). The PM$_{2.5}$ and ozone SAL layers were overlaid onto their corresponding population layers, then following equation 1, the population-weighted annual mean concentrations of PM$_{2.5}$ and population-weighted 6-mo-high-8h-daily-max ambient ozone concentrations were calculated:[60-61]

$$\frac{\sum (P_i x C_i)}{\sum P_i}$$

where P_i is the population in SAL i, and C_i is its corresponding pollutant concentration.

Estimating exposure to PM2.5 and ozone in South Africa for 2000 and 2006
For 2000, the estimate of population-weighted mean PM$_{2.5}$ used by Norman *et al.*[19] was adopted (26.6 μg/m³). A linear interpolation was done between the 2000 and 2012 values to calculate an estimate of PM$_{2.5}$ for 2006. For ozone, the 2012 modelled estimate was used, together with a 20% (95% confidence interval: 15 - 25) increase per decade based on a study by Thompson *et al.*,[62] to calculate values for 2000 and 2006.

Disease outcomes and relative risks
Generally, particulates differ in physical properties, size distribution and chemical composition, depending on their emission sources and formation processes, and lead to different impacts on human health. However, the present study, consistent with other studies,[48] assumes that the relative risks associated with PM$_{2.5}$ depend only on the mass concentration of PM$_{2.5}$, irrespective of the relative contributions of different sources or of differing chemical
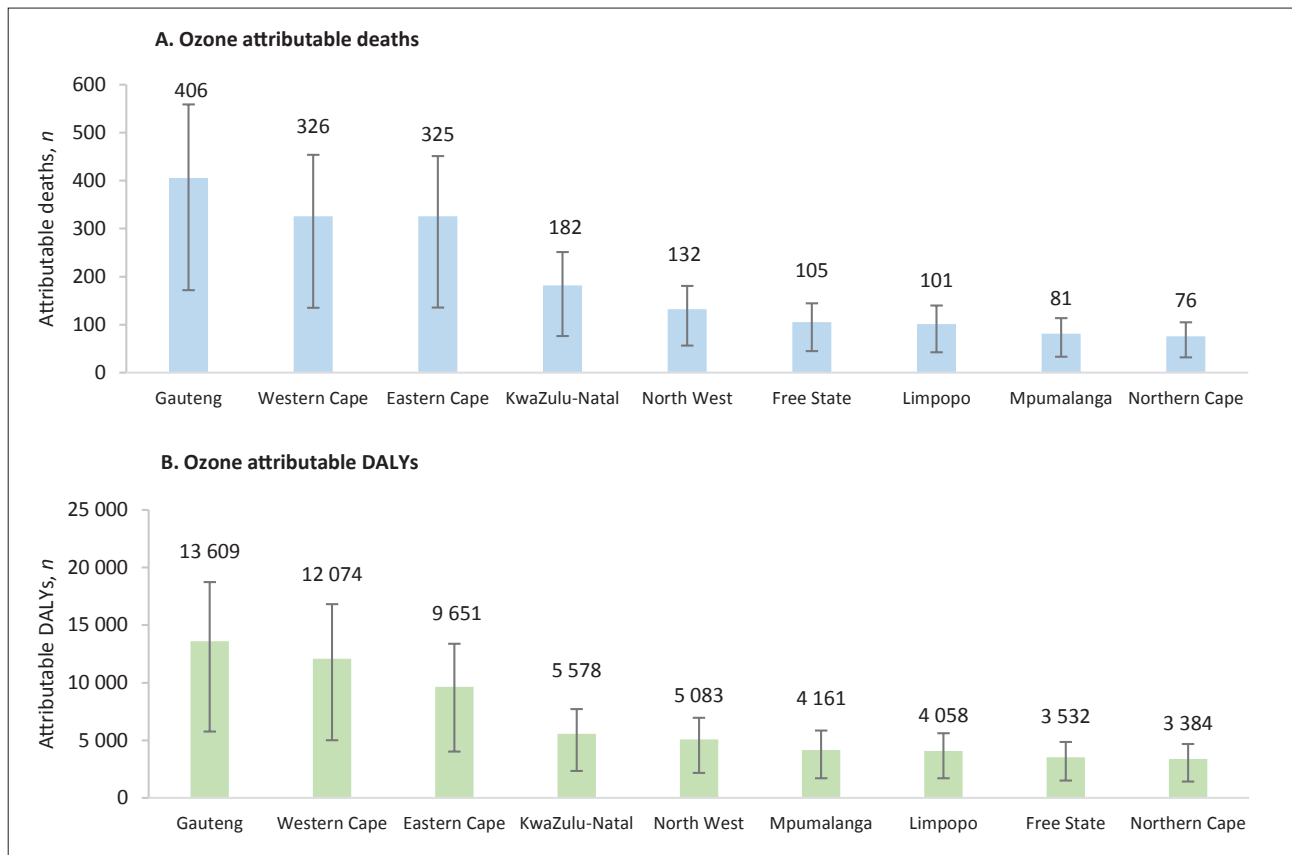
Fig. 6. Ozone-attributable (A) deaths and (B) disability-adjusted life years by province for 2012.

compositions. Thus both primary and secondary PM$_{2.5}$ arising from anthropogenic activities (such as coal power plants, road traffic, industries, open biomass burning, the use of solid fuels in households), and natural events (such as windblown dust, biogenics), are assumed to have the same exposure-response relationship, based only on the mass concentration.[31]

GBD 2017[48] was referenced for appropriate disease outcomes and relative risks associated with PM$_{2.5}$ and ozone (Table 1). For PM$_{2.5}$, integrated exposure response (IER) relative risk curves were derived using available evidence to estimate the relative risks of exposure over the entire global range of exposures (appendix section 1.4: https://www.samedical.org/file/1810).[63,64] IER relative risk curves were used to generate relative risks at each SAL corresponding to computed PM$_{2.5}$ concentrations using R statistical software version 3.6.0 (R core Team, Austria). For ambient ozone exposure, COPD in adults ≥25 years was a risk-outcome pair.[65]

Computation of population attributable fractions

For computing population attributable fractions, Excel spreadsheets were developed for each year of interest. For PM$_{2.5}$, the relative risks (mean, lower bound and upper bound) for each disease outcome and age group were calculated for each concentration of PM$_{2.5}$ in each SAL, using the IER relative risk tables and calculation procedure. We calculated the population exposed to ambient air by taking the total population in each SAL and subtracting the people using solid fuels for cooking.

The attributable fractions for each SAL were calculated using:

$$PAF = \frac{P\left[RR\left(x\right) - RR\left(TMREL\right)\right]}{P\left[RR\left(x\right) - 1\right]}$$

where P is the proportion of the population in each SAL exposed at the ambient air concentration value x and $RR(x)$ and $RR(TMREL)$ are

the relative risks calculated at exposure level x and the counterfactual TMREL values, respectively. For the national and provincial geographies, the PAFs for each age group and risk factor were calculated as the age-group population (in each SAL)-weighted average.

Computation of attributable burden

The attributable fractions were multiplied by the estimates of deaths, years of life lost (YLLs), years of life lived with a disability (YLDs) and disability-adjusted life years (DALYs) from the second SA National Burden of Disease Study (SANBD2)[66,67] for the appropriate year. The national attributable burdens are the sum of the provincial attributable burdens for 2012. Age-standardised death and DALY rates were calculated by multiplying the attributable disease burden by the alternative mid-year population estimates[68] for each respective year, and dividing it by the WHO population standard.[69]

Uncertainty estimation

For PM$_{2.5}$ and ozone, we did not consider uncertainty around the exposure estimates. Uncertainty around the TMREL was included in the calculation of the relative risks. For PM$_{2.5}$ and ozone, we used the lower and upper 95% uncertainty levels of the relative risks to derive the lower and upper 95% uncertainty levels of the attributable fractions, and multiplied these by the burden estimates to produce lower- and upper-bound estimates of attributable burden.

Results

The 2005 WHO AQG for annual mean PM$_{2.5}$ was 10 μg/m³,[36] and the SA National Air Quality Standard for annual PM$_{2.5}$ is 20 μg/m³.[33] Results showed that in 2012, 97.6% of the total population of SA lived in areas that were exposed to population-weighted annual PM$_{2.5}$ concentrations above the 2005 WHO

Table 1. Description of ambient air pollution definitions, disease outcomes and relative risks

	Indicator pollutant	
Information	**PM$_{2.5}$**	**Ambient ozone**
Indicator definition	Annual average concentration of PM$_{2.5}$ in SA in μg/m³	Mean of the 6-month period (July - December) with highest mean 8-hour daily maximum ozone concentrations (ppb)
Theoretical minimum	Assigned a uniform distribution with lower/upper bounds (2.4 - 5.9 μg/m³)[48]	Assigned a uniform distribution with lower/upper bounds (29.1 and 35.7 ppb).[48]
Disease outcomes and ICD-10 codes	LRIs (J09-J18, J20-J22) Trachea, bronchus, and lung cancers (C33-C34) Diabetes mellitus type 2 (E11) IHD (I20-I25) Stroke (I60-I69) COPD (J40-J44, J47)	Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (J40-J44, J47)
Disease outcomes by age group	People of all ages: • LRIs People aged ≥25 years: • Tracheal, bronchus and lung cancer • Diabetes mellitus type 2 • IHD • Stroke • COPD	People ≥25 years: • Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease • For every 10 ppb increase in ozone exposure, the risk of death from COPD increased linearly by 2.9% (RR: 1.06, 95% CI: 1.02 - 1.10).[65]

SA = South Africa; LRI = lower respiratory infection; IHD = ischaemic heart disease; COPD = chronic obstructive pulmonary disease; RR = relative risk; CI = confidence interval.

guideline (Figs 2A and B). Only 5.8% of districts, all located in the Western Cape Province, met this guideline. A total of 69.9% of the total population lived in areas exposed to PM$_{2.5}$ levels above the national standard of 20 μg/m³. Gauteng Province experienced the highest levels of PM$_{2.5}$ pollution, with an average population-weighted annual concentration of 52.3 μg/m³ and a peak of 65.0 μg/m³. Therefore Gauteng, with 24% of the total population, was exposed to high levels of pollution. In addition, the population-weighted mean PM$_{2.5}$ values (μg/m³) in KwaZulu-Natal (30.7), Mpumalanga (24.7), North West (23.5) and Free State (22.5) provinces all exceeded the national standard of 20 μg/m³.

The SA National Air Quality Standard for the daily maximum 8-hour running mean of ozone is 61 ppb. However, the 2005 WHO AQG is 100 μg/m³, which is equivalent to 50 ppb.[36] The analysis of the population-weighted 6-mo-high-8-h-daily-max ozone concentrations in SA found that in 2012, 93.8% of the total population lived in areas that exceed the national standard during the 6-month high-ozone season, while 100% of the areas exceeded the 2005 WHO ozone AQG. The highest mean 6-month high-ozone season values occurred in Free State and North West provinces (80.4 ppb and 80.1 ppb, respectively). The highest 8-hour running mean ozone values, >110 ppb, occurred in Free State, North West, Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal and Eastern Cape provinces.

The 2012 national population-weighted annual average PM$_{2.5}$ concentration was estimated to be 29.7 μg/m³. For 2006, we estimated the population-weighted annual average PM$_{2.5}$ concentration was 28.2 μg/m³, and for 2000 we used a national population-weighted annual average of 26.6 μg/m³.[11] For ozone, the population-weighted 6-mo-high-8h-daily-max ambient ozone for 2012 was 72.1 ppb. It was estimated to be 64.4 ppb for 2006 and 58.1 ppb for 2000.

Burden of disease attributable to ambient air pollution exposure

At a national scale, the number of deaths attributable to PM$_{2.5}$ increased from 15 619 in the year 2000 to 19 507 in 2012, representing a 19.9% increase (Table 2). The number of deaths attributable to ozone increased by 23.5% from 2000 to 2012 (from 1 326 in the year 2000 to 1 734 in 2012) (Table 3).

While comparing the 2000 and 2012 national scale outcomes, the PM$_{2.5}$ age-standardised death rate increased by 2.7% and the DALY rate increased by 5.4% (Figs 3A and B). Similarly, the national scale analysis for ozone shows that the ozone age-standardised death rate increased by 6.0% and the DALY rate increased by 25.8% (Figs 3C and 3D). In the case of both pollutants, the age-standardised death and DALY rates were higher in males than females.

The results in Fig. 4 show that cardiovascular disease contributed to a large proportion of the mortality and morbidity burden attributable to PM$_{2.5}$ in 2000 and 2012. In terms of ozone exposure disease outcome, the study only considers the contribution of ozone to COPD, hence it is not displayed in a pie chart. The national scale analysis for age- and gender-categorised distribution of deaths attributable to PM$_{2.5}$ and ozone (for the years 2000, 2006 and 2012) are provided in section 2.2 of the appendix (https://www.samedical.org/file/1810). In terms of age-categorised impact, the deaths attributable to PM$_{2.5}$ exposure are higher within the age band of ≥70 years (for females) and 60 - 69 years (for males) (appendix Fig. S10). In terms of the deaths attributable to ozone exposure, the age-categorised analysis shows that the female and male populations within the age band of ≥80 years experience the highest impact (appendix Fig. S11).

Burden of disease due to ambient air pollution by province for 2012

The provincial variations on population-weighted annual PM$_{2.5}$ levels are provided in appendix Table S5 (https://www.samedical.org/file/1810). Gauteng (52.3 μg/m³), KwaZulu-Natal (30.7 μg/m³) and Mpumalanga (24.7 μg/m³) had the highest population-weighted concentrations of PM$_{2.5}$. The highest number of deaths and DALYS due to PM$_{2.5}$ exposure occurred in Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal and Eastern Cape (Fig. 5). The provincial analysis determined that lower respiratory infections (in Gauteng) and diabetes mellitus type 2 (in KwaZulu-Natal) are the leading causes of deaths and DALYs attributable to PM$_{2.5}$ (appendix Fig. S12).

When the population structure and underlying cause of death are taken into account, the age-standardised death rates due to PM$_{2.5}$ were highest in Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal and Free State provinces

Table 2. Burden of disease due to ambient PM$_{2.5}$, by health outcome and sex for 2000, 2006 and 2012

Disease outcome	Females			Males			Total		
	AF (%)	Deaths, *n*	DALYs, *n*	AF (%)	Deaths, *n*	DALYs, *n*	AF (%)	Deaths, *n*	DALYs, *n*
2000									
LRIs*	17	1 809	49 553	17	2 010	53 990	17	3 818	103 543
Trachea, bronchus and lung cancers	13	212	3 904	13	539	9 608	13	751	13 512
Diabetes mellitus type 2	25	1 833	40 721	25	1 151	25 891	25	2 983	66 612
IHD	12	1 263	24 064	12	1 579	30 910	12	2 842	54 973
Stroke	8	1 624	31 042	8	1 224	24 282	8	2 848	55 324
COPD	20	852	29 574	20	1 524	35 117	20	2 377	64 690
Total attributable burden	-	**7 592**	**178 857**	-	**8 027**	**179 796**	-	**15 619**	**358 653**
95% UI	-	4 293 - 10 624	103 288 - 246 865	-	4 665 - 11 225	106 109 - 248 658	-	8 958 - 21 849	209 397 - 495 523
% of total burden	-	**3.2**	**1.9**	-	**3.0**	**1.9**	-	**3.1**	**1.9**
95% UI (%)	-	1.8 - 4.5	1.1 - 2.6	-	1.8 - 4.2	1.1 - 2.6	-	1.8 - 4.2	1.1 - 2.6
2006									
LRIs*	19	2 361	61 579	19	2 489	65 246	19	4 851	126 824
Trachea, bronchus and lung cancers	15	272	4 836	15	575	10 013	15	847	14 848
Diabetes mellitus type 2	26	2 659	60 617	26	1 653	36 640	26	4 313	97 258
IHD	1	1 599	30 891	14	2 028	39 601	14	3 627	70 491
Stroke	9	2 044	38 831	9	1 465	28 317	9	3 509	67 148
COPD	22	896	33 886	22	1 629	40 906	22	2 525	74 793
Total attributable burden‡	-	**9 832**	**230 639**	-	**9 840**	**220 723**	-	**19 672**	**451 362**
95% UI	-	5 684 - 13 526	135 857 - 313 146	-	5 842 - 13 560	133 040 - 300 917	-	11 526 - 27 086	268 898 - 614 063
% of total burden	-	**2.9**	**1.8**	-	**2.9**	**1.8**	-	**2.9**	**1.8**
95% UI (%)	-	1.7 - 4.0	1.1 - 2.4	-	1.7 - 4.0	1.1 - 2.5	-	1.7 - 4.0	1.1 - 2.4
2012									
LRIs*	18	2 301	58 131	18	2 423	62 656	18	4 724	120 787
Trachea, bronchus and lung cancers	13	281	4 856	13	597	10 044	13	879	14 900
Diabetes mellitus type 2	24	2 683	72 380	24	1 748	41 706	24	4 431	114 086
IHD	15	1 580	29 462	15	2 045	39 543	15	3 625	69 005
Stroke	10	2 161	38 557	10	1 558	28 517	10	3 719	67 074
COPD	21	789	39 991	21	1 339	37 184	21	2 128	77 174
Total attributable burden	-	**9 797**	**243 378**	-	**9 710**	**219 650**	-	**19 507**	**463 028**
95% UI	-	5 603 - 13 637	142 103 - 332 147	-	5 715 - 13 475	131 319 - 300 791	-	11 318 - 27 111	273 422 - 632 937
% of total burden	-	**3.9**	**2.3**	-	**3.5**	**2.2**	-	**3.7**	**2.3**
95% UI (%)	-	2.2 - 5.4	1.4 - 3.2	-	2.1 - 4.9	1.3 - 3.0	-	2.1 - 5.1	1.3 - 3.1

AF = attributable fraction; DALY = disability-adjusted life year; LRI = lower respiratory infection; IHD = ischaemic heart disease; COPD = chronic obstructive pulmonary disease; UI = uncertainty interval.
*Lower respiratory tract infections were a disease outcome in all ages whereas other outcomes were for people aged >25 years.

Table 3. Burden of disease due to ambient ozone by health outcome and sex for 2000, 2006 and 2012

Disease outcome	Females			Males			Total		
	AF	Deaths, n	DALYs, n	AF	Deaths, n	DALYs, n	AF	Deaths, n	DALYs, n
2000									
COPD	11	476	16 497	11	850	19 589	11	1 326	36 086
95% UI	-	(192 - 676)	(6 644 - 23 453)	-	(342 - 1 209)	(7 889 - 27 849)	-	(534 - 1 885)	(14 533 - 51 302)
% of total burden	-	0.2	0.2	-	0.3	0.2	-	0.3	0.2
95% UI (%)	-	(0.1 - 0.3)	(0.1 - 0.3)	-	(0.1 - 0.5)	(0.1 - 0.3)	-	(0.1 - 0.4)	(0.1 - 0.3)
2006									
COPD	14	564	21 355	14	1 027	25 780	14	1 591	47 135
95% UI	-	(231 - 793)	(8 743 - 30 015)	-	(420 - 1 443)	(10 554 - 36 234)	-	(651 - 2 236)	(19 297 - 66 249)
% of total burden	-	0.2	0.2	-	0.3	0.2	-	0.2	0.2
95% UI (%)	-	(0.1 - 0.2)	(0.1 - 0.3)	-	(0.1 - 0.4)	(0.1 - 0.3)	-	(0.1 - 0.3)	(0.1 - 0.3)
2012									
COPD	17	643	31 781	17	1 090	29 350	17	1 734	61 130
95% UI	-	(270 - 890)	(13 323 - 43 993)	-	(457 - 1 508)	(12 311 - 40 612)	-	(727 - 2 399)	(25 634 - 84 605)
% of total burden	-	0.3	0.3	-	0.4	0.3	-	0.3	0.3
95% UI (%)	-	(0.1 - 0.4)	(0.1 - 0.4)	-	(0.2 - 0.5)	(0.1 - 0.4)	-	(0.1 - 0.5)	(0.1 - 0.4)

AF = attributable fraction based on the numbers of attributable deaths; DALY = disability-adjusted life year; COPD = chronic obstructive pulmonary disease; UI = uncertainty interval.

(appendix Fig. S13: https://www.samedical.org/file/1810). The age-standardised DALY rate was highest in the Free State, which may be due to the large YLL contribution of LRIs to the cause of death profile in that province.[70]

The provincial variations on population-weighted 6-mo-high-8h-daily-max ambient ozone are provided in section 2.3 of the appendix. As shown in appendix Table S6 (https://www.samedical.org/file/1810), the highest values of population-weighted 6-mo-high-8h-daily-max ozone are found in the Free State (80.4 ppb), North West (80.1 ppb) and Gauteng (74.7 ppb). However, the highest number of deaths attributable to ambient ozone exposure occurred in Gauteng and the Western Cape (Fig. 6).

However, when the population structure and underlying cause of death are taken into account, the age-standardised death and DALY rates due to ozone were highest in the Northern Cape and Western Cape (appendix Fig. S14). With COPD being the only cause of death attributable to ozone, the high age-standardised rates in these two provinces are likely due to the high YLL burden of COPD to the cause of death profile in these provinces.

Discussion

This article has shown that in 2012, almost 51 million South Africans (97%) were exposed to harmful concentrations of $PM_{2.5}$ above 10 µg/m³, and 35 million (67%) were exposed to concentrations above the national standard of 20 µg/m³. For ozone, we estimated that >49 million South Africans (93.8%) were exposed above the 61 ppb SA 8-hour standard during the 6-month high-ozone season. For 2000 and 2012, the $PM_{2.5}$ concentrations increased by 12%, from 26.6 µg/m³ to 29.7 µg/m³. During the same period, ozone levels increased significantly. This indicates a widespread problem with ambient air pollution in SA.

$PM_{2.5}$ is a serious challenge in Gauteng, the most densely populated province in SA, with various urban and industrial activities in and around the province responsible for both primary and secondary particulates. In addition to these local sources, the predominance of anticyclonic circulation and strong subsidence over southern Africa promotes adiabatic warming and produces a stable atmospheric thermodynamic structure (as discussed by Tyson and Gatebe[71]). These conditions strongly favour the formation of tropospheric stable layers over southern Africa (usually within an altitude range of 700 - 600 hPa).[72] The semiarid nature of Gauteng, the higher level of gaseous pollutant emissions that are precursors of secondary aerosols, along with the atmospheric stable layers of the region – all these circumstances together facilitate the formation of secondary $PM_{2.5}$. Furthermore, the regional stable layers play an important role in inhibiting the vertical diffusion of particulates: as a result, both primary and secondary $PM_{2.5}$ over most areas of Gauteng are accumulated in the lower parts of the troposphere.

In addition to the local emission factors and the background atmospheric conditions, the mesoscale dynamics of the region play an important role in influencing the spatial distribution of ozone. As a result of the southern African subtropical region predominant anticyclone surface air circulation, most of the anthropogenic plume that originates from highveld zones of Gauteng and Mpumalanga disperses towards the central and eastern parts of SA before exiting the country over the Indian Ocean.[72,73] This plume usually contains hydrocarbons and NO_x that are precursors of ozone. Hence beside the local precursor sources, the abovementioned dynamical conditions of the region, along with the enhanced air temperature and moist meteorological conditions of the coastal regions, aggregately become important contributing factors for enhanced presence of ozone in the eastern parts of the country.

Several other studies[19,74,75] have estimated the burden of disease due to ambient air pollution in SA. SACRA1 estimated the burden of disease attributable to urban outdoor air pollution in SA for the year 2000.[19] The study focused on urban areas, and included six metropolitan areas and the Vaal Triangle area, seven areas with a population of 15 million, 33% of the total 2000 SA population. SACRA1 estimated that outdoor air pollution caused 4 637 deaths. We report a much higher number of deaths (15 619 deaths) due to ambient $PM_{2.5}$ in 2000. The SACRA1 estimate was very conservative, because only 33% of the population in metro areas was assumed to be at risk. In the present study, we estimated that 71% of the SA population were exposed to ambient $PM_{2.5}$ in the year 2000 (i.e. 31 million people were exposed to $PM_{2.5}$). Also, our study included updated relative risks and additional disease outcomes, as evidence has emerged to support the causality of ambient air pollution in various diseases, such as LRIs in people of all ages, diabetes mellitus type 2, stroke and IHD. These factors largely explain why our current estimates are higher.

The State of Global Air[74] (using GBD 2019[3] estimates) estimated exposure to $PM_{2.5}$ using various sources. Their study ascribed 25 500 deaths to ambient $PM_{2.5}$ in SA in 2012, which is higher than the number we estimated (19 507 deaths). The difference between the two studies could be ascribed to the methods used. We used a regionally optimised, fully coupled regional climate chemistry modelling system, with modelled outputs calibrated against SAAQIS air quality monitoring data, whereas the State of Global Air uses satellite observations, a global chemical transport modelling system and a more limited dataset of ground observations than ours (for SA).[74] We used IER relative risk curves (from GBD 2017[48]), whereas the State of Global Air used relative risk curves from GBD 2019.[3] In terms of ambient ozone in SA, we estimated a much higher population-weighted ozone than the State of Global Air (72.1 ppb v. 38.8 ppb), which explains why we estimated more deaths due to ozone (1 734 v. 512 deaths).[74]

Another study applied the BenMAP model to conduct a health impact analysis due to $PM_{2.5}$ in SA. Altieri and Keen[75] used similar inputs to our study but different TMREL values, relative risks and mortality data. They estimated that 14 000 deaths could be avoided if SA met the existing standard for $PM_{2.5}$ exposure of 20 µg/m³, and that another 14 000 deaths could be avoided if the WHO standard of 10 µg/m³ was met. We estimated fewer deaths compared with their study (19 507 v. 28 000), which could be due to the different inputs and the way in which HAP was accounted for.

Strengths and limitations

Various studies have used different techniques to determine the burden of disease attributable to air pollution, all indicating that ambient air pollution is a challenge in SA. To our knowledge, the present study represents the first time that a regionally optimised fully coupled regional climate chemistry model, along with observational calibration, has been applied in conjunction with a burden of disease assessment for $PM_{2.5}$ and ozone for SA. Generally, in terms of estimating $PM_{2.5}$ and ozone concentrations, owing to the computational demands and complexity of atmospheric physicochemical processes, global scale models are implemented at coarse spatial resolutions.[76] On the other hand, fine-scale regional climate models are known to deploy sub-grid scale model physics, locally resolved dynamical information, spatio-temporally variable chemical/photochemical processes and other data. Hence, the regional numerical models are crucial in obtaining more realistic regional (small-scale) chemical and meteorological information at a higher resolution than global scale models.[76,77] Also, the use of

locally driven population and health information are important for more realistic estimates of the disease burden attributable to ambient air pollution. Considering the aforementioned, relative to the GBD, which deploys the global scale model with a coarse resolution, and uses indirectly driven or globally approximated model forcing datasets and coarse-resolution population and health information estimates, the present study has the following advances: (i) it applies a regionally optimised fully coupled climate chemistry model along with locally informed model forcing datasets – this enabled us to capture more realistically the physicochemical processes of the region; (ii) even though the model adequately captured both the magnitude and spatiotemporal distributions of $PM_{2.5}$ and ozone, to further enhance the quality of modelled values and ensure their reliable applicability for regional exposure studies, bias corrections were performed using regionally obtained and quality-controlled surface observations; (iii) unlike the GBD, in terms of population statistics and health information, this study uses locally driven, higher resolution and quality-controlled information from Statistics SA and the national health department for each province of SA.

Compared with the highveld industrial zones of SA, the availability of ground measurement data for coupled model calibration in eastern coastal areas and the south-eastern industrialised regions is limited. Also, the number of ozone observations is generally smaller when compared with the PM monitoring stations. In contrast, the spatial coverage of ground measurements in the northern and eastern parts of the country (particularly over the highveld industrial zones) was much better. This provided the opportunity to generate optimally calibrated $PM_{2.5}$ and ozone values in highly industrialised and densely populated areas of SA. Overall, applying various screening and optimisation techniques, the study applies the best available information at the time. It is also recommended that future assessments could be strengthened through additional monitoring stations and more reliable monitoring data.

We used a previous iteration (GBD 2017[48]) of the IER relative risk curves and associated outcomes. The inclusion of the updated outcomes would likely have increased the attributable burden in our study. In GBD 2019,[3] the relative risk curves were updated with relevant studies at high $PM_{2.5}$ concentrations, studies on $PM_{2.5}$ due to smoking were excluded and meta-regression-Bayesian, regulated, trimmed spline fitting was used to generate risk curves. GBD 2019 also included low birthweight and short gestation as exposure outcomes due to $PM_{2.5}$, resulting in a 44% increase in DALYs compared with GBD 2017.[3] In addition, the IER relative risk curves are constructed using $PM_{2.5}$ from various different sources, and assume equitoxicity of particles, despite current evidence indicating that the source, size and chemical composition of particles impact health differentially.[48] The study is also limited by the assumption that the health effects of $PM_{2.5}$ and ozone are independent. Although this assumption is also made by other burden of disease studies,[48] the health risks due to $PM_{2.5}$ and ozone could be additive or multiplicative.

Conclusion

The burden of disease due to ambient air pollution, particularly due to $PM_{2.5}$, is large, especially when compared with other environmental risk factors such as HAP due to cooking with solid fuels. Research on the health risks associated with ambient air pollution continues to mount, showing that even low levels of exposure can have adverse health outcomes. Reducing the level of ambient air pollution to counterfactual levels in SA would reduce the burden of both non-communicable and infectious diseases.

It is vital that we sustain and amplify efforts to monitor and reduce ambient pollutant concentrations in the country. A comprehensive

system of monitoring stations measuring ambient air quality will provide important information in this effort. The urgent strengthening and enforcement of air-quality-related legislation is needed to reduce both the concentrations of pollutants and consequent burden of disease. In the longer term, the sources of pollution should be addressed: the combustion of fossil fuels for energy and transportation, the major source, should be phased out completely, and should be replaced with sustainable and clean energy sources, which do not produce emissions that are harmful to human health and the environment. Regionally, efforts should also be made to establish multi-country southern African co-operation to reduce air pollution.

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