

Working as an occupational medicine specialist

New Zealand occupational medicine specialists talk about the reality of working within this field

Why did you choose occupational medicine and what do you like most?

The work is varied and interesting and provides a stimulating combination of clinical, theoretical and practical work as well as research. You are able to assess and use information from wide-ranging sources that include engineering, toxicology, industrial processes, behavioural science and legal areas. The specialty brings you into contact with a wide range of people and provides opportunities to preserve health rather than simply diagnose the unchangeable.

I like the preventative side of this specialty and the opportunity to make a difference in a larger population group.

What strengths and abilities make a good occupational medicine specialist?

It is necessary to have good clinical knowledge across a broad range of areas in medicine. You should have an enquiring, unbiased mind and be able to think logically and present ideas and information clearly. Occupational physicians need to possess excellent communication skills and should be willing to function outside the traditional medical paradigm. Having good writing and speaking skills as well as good public relations skills is important when you are working with employers.

As a specialist, can you describe a typical day?

Most specialists have a 'portfolio' of appointments rather than one job with a single company. Practitioners usually undertake a combination of clinical, managerial and other activities that may include liaising with government agencies or researching work exposures and determining appropriate policies. Evaluation of possible workplace problems requires first-hand knowledge, so occupational physicians visit industrial sites to assess hazards and risks.

What do you think are the future challenges of occupational medicine?

There are many challenges that face occupational medicine. Current economic trends mean that in many cases workplace safety issues are not an employer's primary concern. New materials and products (including biological agents) that require assessment are constantly emerging. Many obvious hazards lack scientific evidence for their exact risk quantification, so research that will lead to practical solutions is vital. Another area of development is the increasing focus on workplace stress and fatigue.

What advice would you give someone thinking about a career in occupational medicine?

You should find a good supervisor and obtain a suitably broad training post. Trainees are advised to begin developing their training logbooks as early as possible.

What are future opportunities in occupational medicine?

Industry is slowly retreating from the phase where health and safety issues were an unnecessary luxury, and is beginning to reinvest in expertise. Considerable opportunities are available in various areas of occupational medicine in New Zealand and overseas.

What is the work/life balance like?

It is quite easy to take time out, although this depends to some extent on the nature of the job (for example, whether you are a full-time company employee or whether you work in private practice with many clients). Holidays often fit in with client down time, but are far more flexible than in other areas of medicine.

Occupational medicine does not make any significant demands on family life except when you are studying for the exit exams during training. Various industries work different hours, so you need to be prepared for early morning starts or the occasional night-shift visit. Generally it is possible to fit consulting times and training sessions around your family life. One specialist said that employment with some companies may require you to be based in relatively remote parts of the country, 'well cared-for but far from the opera!'

What are the disadvantages of occupational medicine?

Occupational physicians are at the whim of businesses - the advice that they offer can be undervalued. Occupational medicine involves a significant amount of administration, which might be considered a disadvantage.

Any comments on the current training?

The training programme is very flexible and can be undertaken from a variety of existing jobs. There is a significant coursework component for the training programme and the exams are considered to be relatively difficult.