



Life as an occupational physician

One of a series of profiles of doctors working in occupational medicine

Dr Iona Kennedy, Consultant Occupational Physician in the NHS

I had my first contact with Occupational Medicine as a medical student in the 1980s, during my last year of medical training in Cluj Napoca, Romania. I was working in a Hospital for Occupational Diseases in one of the largest mining areas of the country.

I became aware for the first time how significant work and other social factors could be as determinants of people's health. I found the work varied and interesting, requiring a broad knowledge of general medicine, but also an understanding of aspects of employment and the background working environment. I visited mines, glass factories, foundries and other heavy industries - which were the main industries in Romania at the time - and I found it all fascinating. The associated medical practice was correspondingly very rewarding. After completing three years of general medical training, I was fortunate to obtain a specialist training post at the same hospital, and I became a specialist in Occupational Medicine at the end of a 4-year training programme.

A short spell studying and working at the Institute of Occupational Medicine in Edinburgh was professionally and personally life-changing for me and I decided to settle in the UK. The transition was an exciting period and north London became my new home. I was privileged to secure two attachments to occupational health departments in major NHS Hospitals, which gave me the opportunity to observe variations in service provision between Romania and the UK. While major differences were apparent, particularly in terms of the greater emphasis in the UK on prevention and health surveillance, the broad principles of occupational health practice were very similar. It gave me confidence to believe that my skills were transferable and I undertook a further 4- year training programme in the UK, at the end of which I became a Consultant Occupational Physician in the NHS.

I have never regretted my career choice and now, after 16 years of specialist occupational health practice, I still find the work to be interesting and rewarding.

I enjoy the variety of medical and non- medical aspects of a speciality that has to keep abreast of advances, not only within a broad field of medical practice, but also in subjects such as ergonomics, toxicology, employment and the law.

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