



Life as an occupational physician

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

Philip McIlroy, *Consultant for a major independent provider of occupational health services*

As an undergraduate in Belfast in the 1980's I was constantly aware of occupational disease – the high prevalence of asbestos-related disorders being a legacy of the shipyard. Asking the patient's occupation was always part of the clinical history.

Later as a GP in the North East of England, coal miner's pneumoconiosis was a major cause of debility in my patients. Moving to a practice in rural North Wales, rather than ending my contact with industry, brought an opportunity to do part-time occupational health in a chemical factory. Through learning about occupational health I acquired new knowledge and skills that enhanced my role as a General Practitioner.

As doctors we are aware of our own jobs and careers, but often overlook the fact that our patients also work. I began to understand better how the patient's work might impact on their health, and also how an illness might impact on their ability to work.

As my knowledge of occupational medicine grew, so did the realisation that here was a specialism and a career pathway where I could use the knowledge and skill that I had developed as a GP. There was new medical knowledge to acquire and new competencies to be gained in less familiar areas of law and ethics, as well as furthering communication skills and developing an understanding of business practices.

Having made the move from general practice to occupational medicine I completed my specialist training in a training post in industry with a large engineering company in the Midlands. Now I work as a Consultant for a major independent provider of occupational health services. I see patients with a wide variety of clinical conditions and use my clinical knowledge to assess their fitness for various roles; advising on appropriate support and adjustments that will facilitate a return to work in a productive role.

My work is challenging and varied, requiring judgement and decision-making in settings unfamiliar to most doctors.

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