



**What is an Occupational Physician?**

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Occupational Physicians are highly trained specialists who provide a wide range of services relating to the health of workers and employers. The specialty of Occupational Medicine focuses on the inter-relationships between workers, their workplaces and their work practices. The specialty encompasses prevention, treatment and rehabilitation. It deals with health issues of the individual worker, populations of workers, their interaction with their environment and the "health" of the employing organisation. Occupational Physicians consider medical issues within the wider context of their psycho-social, industrial and motivational frameworks, and have a key role in communicating with employers, business and government.

In summary, Occupational Physicians focus on the health effects of the relationship between workers and their work lives, at both an individual and an organisational level.

An Occupational Physician may work for the government, the military or a large organisation. Work in private practice is common, providing a range of services including patient treatment, workplace assessments, health surveillance and supervision of vocational rehabilitation. Occupational Physicians also provide independent medical opinions on issues such as the worker's fitness to perform certain work duties; the work-relatedness of a worker's condition. They may also perform worker impairment assessments, or provide advice to companies on issues such as illness or injury prevention strategies, or the management of sickness absence.

## What makes an Occupational Physician distinctive?

A unique combination of knowledge, training and skills distinguishes Occupational Physicians from other medical practitioners and general practitioners. These include:

- broad education to deal with the range of the patients' medical problems as they relate to their employment and their work environment
- exposure to a wide range of worksites and work-practices, and training to assess these in terms of their potential effects on an individual worker
- thorough, logical and scientific approaches to providing expert diagnoses
- ability to advise on the best management strategy for the injured worker
- specialisation in the management of work-related disability
- ability to care for patients within their work and social environment, not just within the medical model
- skill in clinical decision-making and cost effective management of injured workers and sickness absence

## How do you become an Occupational Physician?

- After completion of a medical school degree and a compulsory intern year in hospital, doctors who choose a career as an Occupational Physician must train in a program supervised by the Australasian Faculty of Occupational Medicine within The Royal Australasian College of Physicians.
- After completion of a recognised diploma level qualification in occupational health, the trainee participates in a training program that is based on required competencies and is individually supervised by an Occupational Physician mentor.
- Training is completed by satisfactorily fulfilling all assessment requirements including sitting and passing written and clinical examinations.
- Training can be conducted part-time, with trainees having 10 years to achieve their competencies.
- Some Occupational Physicians also develop interest or expertise in a specific area of occupational medicine.

## The Roles of an Occupational Physician

### Consultant Occupational Physician

Occupational Physicians are skilled in the investigation and diagnosis of work-related health problems and can provide a comprehensive approach to the management and prevention of illness. Patients are referred to an Occupational Physician from a variety of sources including their general practitioner; another specialist; an allied health staff member; their employer; insurer; or a statutory body for assessment and/or expert management advice.

### Job Match

Occupational Physicians' training in medicine, ergonomics, work practices and industrial processes makes them uniquely suited to advising on the suitability of matching a particular person to the sort of work required in a particular job.

### Inclusive Approach

The Occupational Physician's assessment is always comprehensive, taking in both medical and non-medical factors in the causation and management of the health problem. This approach enables the true cause of the worker's concerns to be addressed, allowing any non-medical barriers to vocational rehabilitation to be managed.

### Communication

Occupational Physicians work in a team environment and are experts in communicating medical issues with non-physicians. They are specialists in setting the pace and direction of the rehabilitation of patients with work-related injuries or illness, and of negotiating with employers or other stakeholders to achieve outcomes.

### Causality

Occupational Physicians are trained in the critical analysis of evidence-based medicine, research methods, epidemiology, ergonomics, worksite assessment and risk assessments. With their extensive knowledge of normal health, work places and work practices, the Occupational Physician is an expert at determining the work-relatedness of health conditions.

### Sub-specialisation

Examples of some of the areas in which Occupational Physicians specialise include: corporate health, military medicine, musculo-skeletal medicine, toxicology, aviation and transport medicine, underwater medicine, medico-legal medicine or working as a treating specialist.

## How Occupational Physicians are shaping the health care system

Work involves a significant part of life for most adults. All workers have the right to work in a safe working environment. There are significant financial and social consequences to work-related illness and injury, so it follows that healthy workers are more productive workers. With an ageing population, rising costs of healthcare, and the rising cost of work-related disability our society will increasingly need the services of Occupational Physicians who provide integrated, cost-effective and high quality specialist management of these issues.

Occupational Physicians are specialists in co-ordinating the management of complex situations where the injured worker's rehabilitation is impacted on by a range of non-medical work or social factors. To successfully achieve this, the Occupational Physician, in addition to using their medical training, needs to be able to identify the needs and motivations of the injured worker and other stakeholders, and be able to work in a team environment.



**For further information, contact the Faculty:**

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