



# What is Occupational Medicine?

Doctors practising Occupational Medicine (OM) are involved with *the interaction between work and health*. This includes -

- advising about the *prevention* of injuries and disease,
- *assessing fitness* for work (before, during, and after employment),
- and *helping a return to work* after injury or sickness (by finding the most suitable treatment and rehabilitation to achieve early and appropriate return to work and function).

Occupational Medicine can involve not just an individual consultation about a specific worker, but also the management and oversight of work populations. This can provide cost savings for employers, as well as benefits for employees.

## Occupational Medicine Doctors

In terms of expertise there are various levels of doctors in New Zealand:

1. **Doctors with the basic medical graduate qualification (MB ChB or equivalent)** - These are experienced in examining patients, reporting on their diagnosis and treatment, and referring for specialised testing and treatment. But the level of Occupational Medicine taught in general medical training is usually very sparse, so that these doctors are generally in a position to give only limited advice, about an individual patient. They do not necessarily have direct experience of the workplace of that person, so (without advice from those with more expertise) may not be well-placed to advise about work restrictions, for example during a Return to Work scenario.
2. **General Practitioners with a Diploma in Occupational Medicine** - These have completed 1-2 years of postgraduate training in Occupational Medicine, including *visiting and assessing a variety of specialised work environments*. This provides a higher level of Occupational Medicine expertise than in general medical training, so they are well placed to provide a higher level of OM advice in GP and workplace settings, and can provide a more detailed and practical report with recommendations relevant to the workplace.
3. **Occupational Medicine Registrars** - These are doctors in the process of *undertaking specialist training* (step 4 below) usually preceded by completing step 2 above. Most importantly, as part of their ongoing training they are mentored by specialists in this field, so as they progress in training they are increasingly well-placed to provide a high level of OM advice, not just about the individual but also about improvements to the work environment.
4. **Occupational Medicine Specialists (often termed *Occupational Physicians*)** - These hold the qualification of Fellow of the Faculty of Occupational & Environmental Medicine (FAFOEM) in the Royal Australasian College of Physicians – or the UK based equivalents, FFOM(RCP) or FFOM(RCPI) -- recognised by the Medical Council of NZ. They have usually completed around five years of extensive, fulltime OM training. Competencies include knowledge of the law, biostatistics and epidemiology; and skills in clinical medicine, communication, management,



and workplace inspection. Thus OM specialists are able to address the full range of complex OM issues, including if necessary providing advice as an expert witness in disputes.

### **What is ANZSOM?**

**The Australia & NZ Society of Occupational Medicine** is a professional body of Occupational Medicine doctors. ANZSOM membership includes doctors at all the levels listed above. ANZSOM is affiliated with other bodies of occupational health practitioners. ANZSOM helps provide opportunities for continuing education for its members and is involved in advocacy of quality OM practice in both New Zealand and Australia. Its New Zealand website provides a database of OM doctors to assist with locating suitable and qualified expert OM advice and input throughout the country (<http://www.anssom.org.nz/>).

### **What is AFOEM?**

**The Australasian Faculty of Occupational & Environmental Medicine** is part of the Royal Australasian College of Physicians. It is involved with the training of OM specialist doctors and with certifying the program of continuing medical education for its Fellows (fully-qualified Occupational Physicians). There are similar specialist bodies in England (part of the RCP) and Ireland (RCPI).

### **Other (Occupational Health) Practitioners**

None of the following are doctors, but they will often work with doctors as part of a wider multidisciplinary occupational health service.

**Occupational Health Nurses (OHN)** - These nurses have additional training around occupational issues. If attached to a workplace they can provide injury management, and may be certified to do tests such as audiometry, as well as providing immunisation services and preventive education.

**Occupational Therapists (OT)** – May assist with assessments of certain types of work content and work environment - including *basic* workplace assessments. As well, OTs are often involved with day to day monitoring of an employee's Return to Work. Although their title may cause them to be confused with occupational *physicians*, they are not medical practitioners, and (unless specially trained and registered as such) not *ergonomists*.

**Occupational Physiotherapists** - Can play a similar role to the OT in terms of basic workplace assessments. As well they can assist with rehabilitation and monitoring of the return to work progress.

**Ergonomists** – specially trained in Human Factors/Ergonomics (the interaction between the physical and organisational work environment and the worker). They have special expertise in how to fit workers better to the physical and organisational environment.

**Occupational Hygienists** - Trained in detailed workplace assessments, to measure hazards such as chemicals, dust, noise, radiation, and extremes of temperature. This includes assessment of the effectiveness of hazard controls (such as extraction ventilation and noise reduction measures). It can involve workplace or individual monitoring to assess the hazard in question.