

FACULTY OF OCCUPATIONAL MEDICINE

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What does an Occupational Physician do?

An occupational physician is a doctor, **with specialist training and qualifications**, who in relation to any particular workplace takes full clinical responsibility for advising management and the workforce on all health matters connected, directly or indirectly, with their employment. This may have a bearing on health as it affects work or on the effect of work on health, including that of the public at large, either in general or as individuals.

The employer has a statutory duty to **undertake an informed risk assessment**, to identify what can cause or contribute to ill health in the workplace; to determine the action required to prevent people being made ill by work, and to introduce suitable control measures to protect the worker, contractors or the public at large, either in general or as individuals.

The Occupational Physician's duties vary greatly according to the occupational groups involved, but generally come under two distinct headings:

The effects of work on health

- advising management and committees within the organisation on all health aspects of the working environment, the medical implications of health and safety legislation, and the significance of hazards to health at work, for instance those identified under the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations (COSHH) 1999
- being aware of the risk assessments that are required by the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 for workers with particular needs (e.g. new or expectant mothers and young persons) or workers exposed to particular hazards (e.g. harmful substances or unsociable working hours)
- establishing contact and building effective relationships with the personnel or human resources staff and with the other disciplines and representatives concerned with health and safety at work, as well as with employees of all grades
- undertaking regular visits to all workplaces, including offices and catering facilities, in order to keep workplace knowledge up to date
- advising management on first aid and emergency services and equipment within the workplace. This will include arranging for the immediate treatment of medical



and surgical emergencies and these arrangements should be made in conjunction with the nearest hospital Accident and Emergency department, which should be kept informed of any toxic chemical hazards (The Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 and its regulations, codes of practice and guidance notes and the Health and Safety (First Aid) Regulations 1981 are relevant) which exist in the workplace

- establishing contact with the Health and Safety Executive's local Employment Medical Advisory Service
- advising on the number, training and deployment of qualified first aiders
- supervising the hygiene and safety of facilities such as kitchens, canteens, and laboratories
- undertaking health education and health promotion work with employers, primarily on occupational health matters.

The effects of health on work

- giving advice to all employees on health as related to their capacity for specific and general work
- assessing prospective employees and advising as to their initial placement. Special consideration of the disabled prospective employee is required, as is liaison with help agencies, to ensure that the working environment is suitable
- assessing and examining those workers referred to them by a manager as having frequent or prolonged sickness absence, to promote earliest return to work in duties commensurate with their health
- assessing and examining those returning from pro-longed absence due to serious injury or illness. Doctors may consider recommending modification of work patterns or equipment, part-time or restricted work, rehabilitation, redeployment or retirement on health grounds
- advising management on health promotion and general health screening, and making arrangements for this to be carried out where appropriate.

From the Occupational Health Committee of the British Medical Association's publication 'The Occupational Physician' June 2001.

Important Points

- (1) An Occupational Physician is a doctor with specialist training and qualifications. Therefore General Practitioners are not Occupational Physicians, neither are Internists.
- (2) Risk assessments, although considered part of Safety are integral to Occupational Health. This shows yet another point that Occupational Health and Safety have to work in Tandem to produce the best results.
- (3) There are two areas which should be examined closely in a workplace:
 - (a) The effects of work on health
 - (b) The effects of health on work

Sources

- Faculty of Occupational Medicine, Royal College of Physicians. UK (excerpt)