



FACULTY OF OCCUPATIONAL MEDICINE

ROYAL COLLEGE OF
PHYSICIANS OF IRELAND



OCCUPATIONAL MEDICINE: WHAT IS IT?

By Dr Eoin O'Mahony & Prof Ken Addley
Faculty Advocacy Committee

AN OVERVIEW OF OCCUPATIONAL MEDICINE

Occupational Medicine (OM) is a medical specialty which focuses on the interface between work and health and refers to the medical practice by doctors/physicians. This paper outlines, the role of occupational medicine specialists, and current and future objectives for the specialty in Ireland.

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Occupational Medicine

Occupational Medicine (OM) is a medical specialty which focuses on the interface between work and health and refers to the medical practice by doctors/physicians. The field of OM emerged during the industrial revolution in response to an increasing prevalence of occupational illnesses associated with evolving technological processes and hazards¹. Work is now recognised as an important social determinant of health and the understanding of work-related illness has grown exponentially over the last century particularly. Work-related ill health remains a significant societal and individual burden however, and there is an increasing recognition of emerging occupational risks including psychosocial factors which may become more prevalent with the evolving nature of developed economies and the workplace².

The difference between OM and Occupational Health (OH) is that OH is an umbrella term for the specialist multidisciplinary field which focuses on the interactions between work and health safety, and welfare of people in all occupations with a strong emphasis on the primary prevention of work-related ill health. OM and OH are therefore closely related and intertwined. In practice, OH is a multidisciplinary field which includes physicians, industrial hygienists, nurses, ergonomists, and health & safety managers among others.

The goals of OH services include:

- The maintenance and promotion of workers' health.
- Ensuring the working environment is conducive to safety and health.
- Contributing to development of work and organisational cultures which support health and safety at work, promote a positive social climate, and contribute to workplace productivity³.
- Promoting the benefits of good work and the reduction of health inequity⁴.

OM specialists, or as they are commonly known Occupational Health Physicians (OHPs), are specially trained physicians who combine their clinical acumen with their knowledge of the workplace to preserve and promote the health and wellbeing of the workforce. They apply their clinical skills in unique environments for the benefit of employees, organisations, and wider society. The OHP role is varied, and daily roles may include activities such as fitness for work assessments, sickness absence and disability management, health promotion, health surveillance, and travel consultations⁵. OHPs recognise that the workplace is an important determinant of ill health and understand the hazards in the workplace which may be physical, chemical, biological, ergonomic, psychological, or environmental. The need for OHPs who can identify and respond to health concerns within the work environment has been acutely highlighted by the recent pandemic.

OCCUPATIONAL MEDICINE IN IRELAND

The Faculty of Occupational Medicine (FOM) was established in 1976 within the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland (RCPI) and is accredited by the Medical Council as the only recognised postgraduate medical specialist training body for OM in Ireland⁶. Doctors wanting to undertake higher specialist training in OM will need to apply to join the OM specialist training programme. This involves a competitive application and interview process under the auspices of FOM and RCPI. If successful in that process, the doctor will enter a Specialist Registrar post and complete a four-year training program during which they undergo training and assessment to obtain (by examination) Licentiate of the Faculty of Occupational Medicine (LFOM) and subsequently Membership of the Faculty of Occupational Medicine (MFOM). The training programme is governed by the Training Handbook in OM and is managed by the FOM and RCPI.



Upon completing training doctors are awarded a Certificate of Satisfactory Completion of Specialist Training (CSCST) and can be entered on the specialist register of the Medical Council. Trainees in occupational medicine gain an understanding of a variety of topics pertinent to health in the workplace including toxicology, epidemiology, industrial hygiene, health and safety law, and health and safety management. The FOM also provides continuous professional development and lifelong learning resources for its 500+ members by hosting a calendar of teaching events and meetings throughout the year⁶. Professional organisations such as the Irish Society of Occupational Medicine ensure there is an active network of OHPs to support peer learning and continuing discourse surrounding issues related to work related ill health in Ireland⁷.

THE FUTURE OF OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH

It is accepted that OH services provide many benefits for organisations and the workforce⁸. Keeping workers healthy and engaged in the workforce is high on the political agenda and governments are increasingly recognising the social and economic benefit of these services⁹. Occupational medicine is a rapidly evolving medical speciality due to the changing nature of work. The digital revolution led by technological multinationals and characterised by rapid technological advancements, shifting production facilities, and precarious employment arrangements have given rise to new challenges to maintaining the health of the workforce¹.

In Ireland we must be awake to both the health and economic challenges that will arise due to these changes and ensure that workers and organisations are equipped to reach their full potential in the face of these challenges.



In November 2022 the Faculty of Occupational Medicine released a strategy document entitled [*Advocating for the Value of Occupational Health in Ireland 2023-2026*](#), which outlines the faculties' strategy to enhance the understanding and uptake of occupational health services in Ireland in the coming years¹⁰. This document provides a framework for the role occupational medicine can play in the betterment of individual, organisational, and societal wellbeing.

Demographic, social, and economic factors suggest that occupational medicine practitioners will have an increasingly important role to play in public health and public policy in the coming years¹¹. In doing so, they will also promote the benefits of good work and employment and how that can assist in reducing health inequity within the population.

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