



This series provides insight into the careers of retired and actively serving occupational physicians. The interview series has supported a collaboration amongst our peers in developing projects on compiling the history of occupational medicine. On this occasion, I had the pleasure of meeting Dr Wing Chan.

Dr Farhan Shahzad, Consultant Occupational and Environmental Medicine, Sydney

Farhan: *Welcome to this interview series for senior occupational physicians. Dr Chan, could you tell us about yourself, your personal life, and your earlier training?*

Dr Chan: I'm originally from Singapore, where I grew up in a family of six children. My father was an accountant, and my mother, a housewife, took charge of our education. She always encouraged us to pursue internationally recognised qualifications, given Singapore's uncertain economic situation post-independence. My eldest brother, Hon, was very interested in medicine, which inspired me as a child. I often browsed through his medical books.

Initially, my interest lay in engineering and science, but a personal experience changed that. When I was sick as a teenager, the doctor's lack of explanation disappointed me. I wanted to understand my own health and decided to pursue medicine instead. I studied at Trinity College, University of Dublin, which offered a new continuous assessment-based curriculum. Those years were among the most enjoyable of my life, despite financial challenges. After graduating, I worked in haematology, endocrinology, and urology in Dublin before moving to London for my senior housemanship.

My career path changed when I faced visa constraints linked to Singapore's national service requirements. My siblings had spread out, to Canada, England, and Australia, so I decided to migrate to Australia in 1976, following my brother who had moved there. I worked as a GP, then went into occupational medicine.

Farhan: *What developed your interest in occupational medicine?*

Dr Chan: My journey into occupational medicine was quite accidental. After spending some time in general practice and even considering paediatrics, I came across my sister's study notes from her Master of Public Health course. The topics were fascinating, especially the combination of science and toxicology. This piqued my curiosity, and I decided to pursue occupational medicine.

In 1982, I joined a 10-week occupational medicine course. At that point, I had no knowledge of workplace health, unlike my peers who were already working in the field. The course included site visits to factories and mines, which opened my eyes to the importance of occupational health. By 1985, I shifted to full-time occupational medicine under the mentorship of Dr John Olsen, which exposed me to a variety of industries and gave me the freedom to explore the field.

I realised, however, that I needed more knowledge, so I pursued a Master of Safety Science at the University of New South Wales in 1988. Ergonomics, in particular, interested me, and the course broadened my understanding of workplace safety and injury prevention.

Farhan: *What have been some of the highlights of your career?*

Dr Chan: My career has been incredibly diverse and fulfilling. Some highlights include:

Industrial Experience: I worked with a variety of industries, including manufacturing, councils, and pharmaceutical companies. For instance, at the Goodyear tyre factory, I dealt with chemical exposures, ergonomics, and physical strain. Similarly, working with GlaxoSmithKline exposed me to pharmaceutical manufacturing processes like capsuling and packaging.

Ergonomics and Rehabilitation: Much of my work involved addressing musculoskeletal injuries, ergonomics, and rehabilitation. I've worked closely with site managers, engineers, and occupational health nurses to improve workplace safety.

Mentorship and Education: I've been deeply involved in training and mentoring. As a member of the New South Wales Regional Committee since 1990, I organised educational programs for trainees. I also coordinated the occupational medicine module at UNSW for six years.

Academic Achievements: Winning the best student prize in my Master of Safety Science course was a proud moment, especially since I was relatively new to the field compared to my peers.

Farhan: Could you share your thoughts on the current state of occupational medicine and its future?

Dr Chan: Occupational medicine has evolved significantly over the years, but there are challenges. The decline of heavy industries in Australia has reduced opportunities for hands-on training. For instance, industries like vehicle manufacturing, which once provided valuable experience, have largely disappeared.

We need to address the shortage of structured training positions. Trainees must adapt to the changing landscape and focus on gaining practical experience wherever opportunities arise. I've also observed that trainees often gravitate toward roles in assessments or consultancy due to job security concerns. While these roles are important, I encourage trainees to seek on-site positions to gain a more comprehensive understanding of workplace health.

Farhan: Do you have a message for trainees and fellow physicians?

Dr Chan: My advice to trainees is twofold:

Maintain Clinical Skills: Our medical expertise sets us apart from other professionals in the field. Keep your clinical skills sharp by working part-time in general practice or emergency medicine if possible.

Be Adaptable: The field of occupational medicine is dynamic. Be flexible and willing to explore different industries. Focus on gaining practical experience and building relationships with workers and employers.

Lastly, always remember the importance of safe work in promoting physical, mental, and social well-being. This belief should underpin your approach to occupational medicine. Dr. Wing Chan Farhan: Thank you, Dr Chan, for sharing your inspiring journey. Dr Chan: Thank you for having me. Reflecting on my career has been a rewarding experience. I hope my story encourages others to contribute to this vital field.