

## AFOEM Fellows interview series

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 Ian Cheng.

**Dr Farhan Shahzad, Consultant Occupational and Environmental Medicine, Sydney**

**Farhan: Welcome Dr Ian Cheng to the interview series. Please tell us about your personal and professional life.**

**Ian:** I was born in Sydney, so I'm an ABC – Australian-born Chinese. I didn't map out a particular career pathway when I was young. I think a number of serendipitous moments have characterised my post-high school course. I unintentionally ended up with several Graduate and Post-Graduate qualifications because they were relevant or were required for the things that I was interested in at the time. Growing up, I was a bit of a formula 1 and aviation geek. After completing a Bachelor of Mechanical Engineering, I was offered a scholarship to complete a Master's in Biomedical Engineering, but also had the choice of going to medical school. I chose the latter. After completing my residency at Westmead Hospital, I spent the next 14 years there working part-time in Emergency Medicine because I decided to help in the family business that involved manufacturing commercial and household cleaning chemicals. After divesting the business, I applied to be an Occupational Medicine Registrar at Royal North Shore Hospital (RNSH). I thought, "*Now that will be an interesting area where I can combine both engineering, business and medicine*" because as you know, engineering controls are often applied as a hazard control measure. So that's how I ended up in Occupational and Environmental Medicine.

Presently, I am a Senior Staff Specialist for Northern Sydney Local Health District based at RNSH. I'm also in private practice doing occupation, environmental and aviation medicine. I've also had the opportunity to have worked for Qantas Airways, IBM and the aviation regulator, CASA.

**Farhan: Please tell us about your achievements, memories and highlights of your career.**

**Ian:** As a trainee, I won the Ramazzini Prize, but only two of us presented! With regards to Aviation, I was President of the Australasian Society of Aerospace Medicine from 2013 to 2016. I feel very fortunate and privileged to have had Dr Roman Simson as my supervisor and mentor. I think his wisdom, empathy and vast experience was both inspirational and invaluable - not just as a trainee but also as a Fellow. I've also been lucky to job share at RNSH with Dr Nalayini Kanagaratnam for nearly two decades.

**Farhan: What interests you now and what's your legacy?**

**Ian:** I think I'll leave it to others to determine whatever legacy I may or may not have left. One of the challenges has been trying to raise the profile and promote the value of Occupational Medicine within NSW Health. The initial risk assessment and management of COVID-19 within healthcare facilities was understandably driven by infection control practitioners, infectious diseases physicians and public health. However, in 2021 I was invited to be the Occupational Physician representative on the NSW Clinical Excellence Commission COVID-19 Infection Prevention Control Strategic Task Force and also to be on the NSW Health Infrastructure Ventilation Panel. Prior to COVID-19, I was appointed onto NSW Health's Blood Borne Virus Advisory Panel and NSW Health's Occupational Assessment Screening and Vaccination Expert Working Group.

**Farhan: What advice do you have for Trainees and Fellows?**

**Ian:** Even though the opportunities for hospital-based Occupational Medicine are limited, I would encourage both trainees and Fellows to avail themselves of opportunities as they arise. Sure, it's not as financially rewarding as working in private practice or in industry, but it's off-set by the terrific breadth and variety of things one can see and do. Hospitals aren't just about staff delivering clinical services; we have hotel services (porters, cleaners, laundry, food & beverage), transportation services and maintenance (plumbers, electricians, carpenters, etc.). My private practice also contributes towards further diversity of work and rewards.

I would like to see occupational medicine apply what aviation medicine training has achieved. You may or may not be aware that there is a rotational traineeship position in aviation medicine where a trainee is periodically rotated through placements at Qantas, Virgin and CASA. It would be wonderful for an occupational medicine trainee if they could rotate through a public hospital, a manufacturing company, a mining company, Safework, etc. in a structured program to get that broad experience. It was always drilled into me by Dr Roman Simson that a wide range of workplace visits and assessments were a fundamental activity and competency for a trainee.

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