

## [AFOEM Fellows interview series](#)

This series provides insight into the careers of retired and actively serving physicians in occupational medicine. I am very privileged and extremely humbled to continue to meet inspiring colleagues. On this occasion I had the pleasure of talking to Dr Keith Adam

Dr Farhan Shahzad, Consultant Occupational and Environmental Medicine, Sydney

**Farhan: It's a pleasure to have Dr Keith Adam join us from Brisbane. Please tell us about yourself.**

**Keith:** Upon reflection, I now realise that I've worked in occupational medicine for 40 years. It's not a figure that I repeat loudly but yes, I've been around for a while. I've had the opportunity and pleasure of meeting many of my colleagues at various meetings or through working with them. I've certainly found it to be an interesting, challenging and exciting career that has kept me going for 40 years.

I grew up in Brisbane and attended the University of Queensland. After graduating, I packed up and moved to Adelaide to do my residency. I spent 3 years at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital, a year doing various locums before finally finding myself in some sort of a hiatus. I then found myself working for John Wyatt, at the Mile End Industrial Injury Clinic, which has now evolved into the Corporate Health Group. This was my gateway to occupational medicine. I was at a stage in my career where I had done 3 years of hospital residency and thought about doing general practice. I thought, *"This is something I've got a bit of interest in. I can always take the job for 12 months and see what I think"*. That really was my pathway into occupational medicine.

I spent 7 years in Adelaide. I was fortunate enough that when I did my training at Uni, they did a reasonable amount of teaching in occupational medicine. Dr Bob Scott, the father of my good friend, had an occupational health practice in Brisbane, and had taken a job with WorkSafe Australia and was moving to Canberra. He asked me if I wanted to return to Brisbane and take over his occupational health work. I moved back to Brisbane and in addition to the regular factory visiting work I inherited from Dr Scott, I set up an occupational health clinic. At that time, there were a couple of colleagues working in Brisbane who had predominantly been general practitioners and had developed an interest in the area and had regular appointments to a couple of local employers. They were all working for companies, part time. I realised that Brisbane didn't have large head offices and I was unlikely to gain a full-time position there, so I opened a clinic, similar to that I had worked in South Australia. It's really evolved into the sort of occupational health practice that is fairly common around Australia.

**Farhan: Looking back, what are your highlights, memories or achievements?**

**Keith:** I think the work attracts a certain kind of person; what I enjoy most is being able to get out of the office and into workplaces to gain a better understanding. I'd like to think that setting up my practice in Brisbane gave me the opportunity to employ other doctors over the years. I guess it's part of my legacy. I'd like to think it'll be a generation of occupational physicians that's followed. I can remember appearing in Court for cross-examination, quite vigorously, by a barrister who was saying, *"Who are occupational physicians and what do people think of them? What do your colleagues think?"* The Judge looked down from the bench and said, *"Even the Royal College of Surgeons had to start somewhere"*. I'd like to think that one of the things I managed to help do was create an awareness of exactly who occupational physicians were.

I was quite fortunate to have worked with a very good occupational therapist, Ann White. We developed quite a good rehabilitation process which involved occupational therapists who would visit worksites. Between us, we set up a pretty comprehensive program because it was certainly something that local insurers subsequently imitated.

After setting up my practice, I did the short course at Sydney Uni. This is where I met Dr Anne Long who at that stage, was lecturing the course and went on to become one of our Faculty Presidents.

**Farhan: What message do you have for trainees and fellow colleagues?**

**Keith:** Obviously, work is changing or the nature of the work is. I'm giving away my age , but when I first moved back to Brisbane, one of my first jobs was working part-time for GMH at their car assembly plant in Brisbane. Clearly, not only has that plant long been closed but the whole industry is gone. There certainly has been a loss of that traditional manufacturing industry. Some of the challenges are different. I learnt so much from going out into the workplace talking to people and gaining a better understanding of exactly what the job entailed.

I think if you haven't got a pair of steel cap boots then I'm not sure how you're practicing occupational medicine. I've seen a number of situations where you can only solve a problem when you physically look at it yourself. Often, its insight into the interpersonal relationships in the workplace which is the key that allows you to solve the problem. Without the credibility which comes from visiting the workplace and understanding the issues, your opinion won't be worth as much.