

[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 Rosemary Nixon.

Farhan: Welcome, Dr Rosemary Nixon. Please tell us a bit about your life, medical career, and training?

Rosemary: A key event of my earlier life which influenced me was taking a gap year and working as a lab assistant at Prince Henry's Department of Medicine in Melbourne. Until then, I really hadn't considered a career in medicine. I met some inspirational folk who were undertaking physician training and doing research. Initially I didn't get in to medicine, which was a bit of a blow, but I ended up doing an Honours Degree in Biochemistry. It turned out that chemistry training became useful in contact dermatitis.

I entered what was called the 'Combined Year' at Monash which took four years to complete the medical course, starting with both 2nd and 3rd year anatomy. I decided to pursue dermatology training having enjoyed it as a student. After failing the final exams, my colleague, (now Professor) Greg Goodman was starting up the Skin & Cancer Foundation in Carlton said, "*we need to have a contact dermatitis clinic at the foundation, would you be prepared to do it?*" Of course I said, "yes." In those days after failing the exams, you didn't get another registrar job and I needed work. So I started the inaugural Contact Dermatitis Clinic in 1987 and loved it. However I didn't so much like seeing women who used myriads of cosmetics and perfumes but enjoyed seeing the young tradies who came in with complicated histories and problems with workplace chemicals. No-one had really specialised in occupational dermatology in Melbourne, so after passing my exams, I went off to study in London with Dr Richard Rycroft at St Johns Institute of Dermatology.

On my return, I realised how important occupational medicine was, so I began an MPH in the occupational medicine stream at Monash. I started an occupational dermatology clinic in 1993 at Monash Medical Centre and was spending more and more time doing occupational work.

I gained my Fellowship in Occupational Medicine in 1994 and am currently the only person with Australian qualifications in both Dermatology and Occupational Medicine. I moved the clinic back to the Skin & Cancer Foundation in 2001 where I had more autonomy. It has recently been renamed the Skin Health Institute. With some initial government funding, I established a small research group, the Occupational Dermatology Research and Education Centre, which continues to this day.

Farhan: What are some of the memories and highlights of your career?

Rosemary: Developing an overseas network of colleagues through meeting at conferences has been a fantastic part of my experience, but in order to do that, I travelled a lot which required much organization, especially with a young family. I'm involved in both an international group (the International Contact Dermatitis Research Group) and an Asia-Pacific group.

I think my most important achievement is to promote awareness of contact dermatitis to dermatologists. When dermatologists are confronted by patients with an eczematous rash, it is easy just to reach for the prescription pad and not think about the cause of the condition. It might be caused by something they're touching and be misdiagnosed as endogenous eczema.

In addition, we defined the Australian Baseline Series almost ten years ago based on our extensive data collection. We were able to decide which were the most important, frequent, and relevant contact allergens in our population. Then we established our Contact Allergen Bank where we provide pre-prepared allergens for patch testing, and this has interested dermatologists all over Australia in patch testing. This led to more demand for more educational offerings in contact dermatitis.

It has also been fantastic mentoring young research fellows over the last 20 years, many of whom I have ended up as dermatologists performing patch testing.

Farhan: What would you like to do with more time, resources, and opportunity at your disposal?

Rosemary: Our work is very much driven by the cases of occupational contact dermatitis we see in the clinic. Having a good database is a really important start.

I have been increasingly aware of the development of literature on the Health Benefits of Nature. There is a fantastic website from the American Society of Landscape Architecture which lists all the medical conditions that can be improved by spending time outdoors. I think that's a pretty interesting area!

Farhan: Do you have a message for Trainees and Fellow Occupational Physicians?

Rosemary: Get involved! Go to conferences, although it's not quite the same online. Interact with your colleagues locally, nationally, and overseas. Get involved in training. Contribute! When you volunteer, as they say, you get back far more than you put in. There have been some fantastic contributors to AFOEM, especially Professor Malcolm Sim AM and Dr David Goddard.