



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 Amanda Silcock.

Dr Farhan Shahzad, Consultant Occupational and Environmental Medicine, Sydney

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

Dr Silcock: I'm from Melbourne originally and spent most of my life here in Melbourne, bar a small stint in the UK. I graduated from Melbourne University in 1974. I then worked at the Alfred Hospital for three years. I initially started off joining the surgical training program because I thought I would like to become an orthopaedic surgeon, however, the 7:00am anatomy tutorials killed it for me. I thought I was heading towards general practice, but an ad in the paper for a course in occupational medicine led by Bruce Hocking changed that. It was a joint venture between ANZSOM and the College of General Practitioners. Occupational medicine was not a specialty then.

I ended up meeting Peter Corby. He had been a GP for many years, but had just started working at Ford, and offered me some work. I then started working at Victorian Railways. All sorts of organisations, be it the oil companies, railways, Melbourne Water etc, had full-time physicians back then. I then joined ANZSOM where I was initially the only female at meetings.

In 1981 my husband was posted overseas, so I worked in England for a couple of years, doing some general practice and an occupational health role with the Merton and Sutton Area Health Authority. Most of my work there involved hospital-based immunisations and managing injuries, within a compensation system quite different from Australia's.

When I returned home, I went back to the railways, became pregnant, and had my daughter.

Farhan: What developed your interest in occupational medicine?

Dr Silcock: My path in occupational medicine continued through ANZSOM, where I was fortunate to be mentored by wonderful senior physicians like Hugh Denehy and Keith Brown. I became involved with the Victorian Branch Council and eventually became secretary. I still joke that I'm probably the only secretary to have organised an AGM from a hospital bed after my daughter arrived a couple of weeks early, back in the days before email or even fax.

I served on the Victorian Branch Council for many years, eventually becoming Chair. When the College of Occupational Medicine was formed in the mid-1980s, I completed a graduate diploma in industrial and occupational hygiene at Deakin, travelling to Geelong weekly with a young baby at home, and met Malcolm Sim, whom I now work with at Monash. Because I had completed that course, I became a Fellow without needing to sit exams. Occupational medicine later became a recognised specialty, and we eventually amalgamated with the College of Physicians.

Farhan: What have been the highlights of your career?

Dr Silcock: My career has been varied. I started with the railways, then worked part-time at Mobil with Peter Clark and others, benefiting greatly from having colleagues and mentors, especially since we had virtually no occupational medicine training in medical school and much of the training is still geared towards hospital training, which is not appropriate for our trainees. My interest deepened after reading Hunter's Diseases of Occupations cover to cover when preparing for an occupational medicine prize. I didn't win, but found it fascinating.

Over the years, I developed a special focus on musculoskeletal issues and later did extensive medicolegal work with organisations like mlcoa and WorkCover. What I've enjoyed most is visiting work sites, gold refineries, prisons, transport depots etc, and seeing how different industries function. I've worked across transport, oil, healthcare (both in the UK and Australia), and the car industry at Toyota, which was rewarding but sometimes challenging, particularly as a woman facing dismissive attitudes from some managers.

Farhan: What has been your experience during the COVID pandemic?

Dr Silcock: During the recent pandemic, I was one of the occupational physicians called in to support the Department of Health, particularly with workplace outbreaks such as those in meat processing. Our role was to help public health teams understand how these workplaces operate and to work with employers on practical strategies.

I'm also deeply interested in aged care. Several years ago, I joined the board of a local not-for-profit aged care facility, which has given me insight into the sector's long-standing structural problems, many of which COVID-19 exposed. One major issue is the extensive casualisation of the workforce. For years I've noticed how many people describe themselves as "full-time casual," with all the insecurity that brings. In the COVID pandemic, this contributed to virus spread because employers often didn't know where staff were working, and many worked across multiple facilities.

Some employers are now shifting away from labour-hire and employing staff directly, which I see as a positive step. I believe we should be lobbying government to address these systemic workforce issues, especially in aged care and meat processing, where casualisation and multiple-site work have been major contributors to outbreaks.

Farhan: Where do you see yourself now?

Dr Silcock: I'm now at the end of my career, and a few years ago I transitioned into teaching, taking over from David Goddard to run the Occupational and Environmental Medicine program at Monash. It came at a time when I was feeling tired of clinical work and ready for a change, and it's been a rewarding challenge, especially this year, adapting undergraduate and MPH teaching to Zoom. I now coordinate an MPH unit, including the online stream, which has kept me busy and engaged. At nearly 69, my next step will likely be retirement, but moving into academia has been a stimulating way to finish my career.

Farhan: What is your takeaway message for young trainees or physicians?

Dr Silcock: I always tell younger colleagues to stay connected, talk to each other, share ideas, and never hesitate to call someone if you need advice or a second opinion. I also strongly believe in visiting as many workplaces as you can. Seeing how people actually work was invaluable for me, whether in the railways, Toyota, or anywhere else. It worries me that many registrars today rarely get on-site, but whenever possible, I encourage them to join me. Workplace visits and collegial interaction are, in my view, essential to becoming a well-rounded occupational physician.