



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 Prof Malcolm Sim AM.

Dr Farhan Shahzad, Consultant Occupational and Environmental Medicine, Sydney

***Farhan: Thanks for joining us during these very busy times of your term. Please tell us more about yourself.***

**Prof. Malcolm Sim:** I was raised in Melbourne and have lived here all my life. I am the middle of five boys. I studied medicine at the University of Melbourne, graduating in 1980. I did a Bachelor of Medical Science research degree during my Medical Degree. After my residency years, I completed a Graduate Diploma in Occupational Hygiene at Deakin University and was fortunate enough to get a Fellowship to study at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine for a year completing my Master's Degree in Occupational Medicine, which was a fantastic experience. I later completed a PhD in epidemiology at Monash University. I am married to my wife, Jane, and we have three adult children, one of whom lives in Hong Kong and another near Brisbane.

***Farhan: Tell us about your training and how you became an Occupational Physician. What in particular drew your interest to this specialty?***

**Prof. Malcolm Sim:** After my two years of residency in Melbourne, I decided that while I found hospital medicine interesting, it wasn't quite what I wanted to do for my future career in medicine. So, I took some time off and travelled overseas through Asia, the Middle East and Europe with my wife for about nine months. When we returned home, a medical officer job came up at the Naval Dockyard in Williamstown. My father-in-law, Dr James Milne an occupational physician who at the time had a leadership role in the recently formed Australian College of Occupational Medicine (ACOM), was always very encouraging of this field. So, even though I had no training or experience, I applied and was successful in taking the job at the Naval Dockyard, which became the start of my journey in Occupational Medicine.

The Naval Dockyard back in the 1980's provided a fascinating work environment. Refitting of naval ships was a major activity, involving exposure to asbestos and a wide range of other hazards. I learned a lot about occupational medicine and also industrial relations. I then worked at the Occupational Health Service in the Victorian Department of Labor for a couple of years, doing worksite inspections with hygienists and inspectors and health monitoring of workers exposed to various hazards.

I then went to London to complete my MSc in Occupational Medicine. It was really helpful to have had a few years of practical experience before this period of intensive study and this helped me to be one of the joint winners of the Prize for top student. After returning to Melbourne I sat my ACOM Fellowship examination. The time in London had stimulated my interest in research and teaching and I was fortunate to be offered a part-time teaching position at the Monash University Dept of Social and Preventive Medicine in December 1988. I then

received an NHMRC Fellowship to do a PhD and commenced active research and established the Monash Centre for Occupational and Environmental Health (MonCOEH).

**Farhan: Please tell us about your achievements, your memories and your highlights?**

**Prof. Malcolm Sim:** In 1993, I did a postdoctoral fellowship at the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health in Cincinnati, Ohio in the US. That was a fantastic year, and I was involved in several health hazard evaluations, worksite visits and some longer-term research projects. I still keep in close touch with some colleagues at NIOSH.

I was Editor-in-Chief of *Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, one of the BMJ specialty journals, for seven years and have been involved with the journal for 26 years in various other roles. It is a highly respected international journal that has influenced workplace health policy and practice and opened up a wide international research and professional network to me.

Another highlight was leading a delegation to China about a decade ago. We were part of an AusAID funded project to investigate Occupational Disease Surveillance in China. Several colleagues and I gathered statistics around occupational lung disease, and we then had a return visit by a group of Chinese clinicians whom I took to site visits in Victoria, Canberra and Sydney. I have also done some follow up projects in China which I have really enjoyed. I also worked for six months at the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) in Lyon in the south of France. I am on the WorkSafe Victoria Health and Safety Committee, and I was on the ethics committee for the Australia Health and Welfare for nine years.

And of course, becoming President of AFOEM has been another highlight. I was also given an honorary Fellowship of the Irish Faculty of Occupational Medicine and gave the George Smiley lecture in November 2018. Through this, I have developed a strong link with our Irish colleagues. I was also awarded Fellowship of the Faculty of Occupational Medicine, London.

Our Centre at Monash set up the Occupational and Environmental Health courses in the 1990s, the Graduate Diploma and Masters, which many of our AFOEM trainees have completed. We also run a short course in clinical occupational medicine that was set up about a decade ago, which is still running and is very popular and well attended.

Recently, I led a review of the respiratory health monitoring program following the black lung problem in Queensland coal mine workers. This review identified several deficiencies, such as the process of training the examining doctors, quality of x-rays and respiratory function testing and recording of medical information. This has led to major changes in medical monitoring in that industry. Since then, we have had the accelerated silicosis issue in which I have been involved through AFOEM and Monash. These two issues have demonstrated that occupational disease prevention requires constant vigilance.

Another interesting experience I have had is my involvement with the International Commission on Occupational Health. I was elected to the Board for two terms, and I also led the successful bid to hold the triennial ICOH Congress here in Melbourne, which is now to be held virtually in February 2022, as a face-to-face meeting is not possible due to COVID-19.

Finally, being awarded a Member of the Order of Australia in 2019 for significant service to occupational and environmental medicine was the pinnacle of my career and completely unexpected. After more than 32 years at Monash, I have recently 'retired' from the university and have been given an Emeritus Professor position, so I will maintain some ongoing involvement in MonCOEH.

**Farhan: Your experience at Monash and international collaborations have been unique, what do you feel is your legacy?**

**Prof. Malcolm Sim:** I think we have made a big impact through our research and education Centre at Monash. We have got a strong presence in the medical course and our students develop a wide understanding of Occupational & Environmental Medicine in medical practice. Setting up the postgraduate programs for trainees has been important because it has helped to train and develop a new generation of Occupational and Environmental Physicians. By setting up our research program, we have become a major reference group for government and industry bodies for advice and establishing long term research projects, especially in 'high risk' industries.

We have undertaken several large-scale cohort studies, set up veteran health cohorts and identified mental health problems associated with deployments in military service. We have done firefighter studies and identified the excess of cancers in that group, which has had legislative implications. Setting up that strong bedrock of research, training, and advisory roles has been a key part of our success at Monash.

**Farhan: What further plans do you have and you aspire to do more?**

**Prof. Malcolm Sim:** The AFOEM Presidency is a great opportunity to raise the profile and reputation of Occupational and Environmental Physicians both in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand and within RACP itself. We have had the opportunity to help influence the government responses during the COVID-19 pandemic by highlighting the importance of an effective health and safety framework, the hierarchy of controls and risk assessment.

We need to promote our Faculty more amongst prospective trainees as we have a lot to offer both in clinical and population health roles. I would like to raise the research profile within our Faculty as well. I am very much an internationalist, so I would also like us to develop stronger links with like bodies in other countries, especially in low and middle-income countries, where occupational and environmental medicine capability is often low.

**Farhan: What's your message for trainees and fellow colleagues?**

**Prof. Malcolm Sim:** For our registrars, it can be a hard road, as it is quite a rigorous training program, but it is important to take it seriously because you need to prepare for it. Getting an AFOEM Fellowship is quite an achievement, and then you have an interesting career ahead of you and the potential for many career options. The great thing about Occupational and Environmental Medicine is the wide diversity of practice. You can teach, research, do advisory work in government and for industry bodies and do worksite visits, which can all complement the clinical work.

For the Fellows, I would encourage you to contribute to the Faculty. A lot of the issues that come through the College of Physicians have a strong Occupational and Environmental Medicine component, such as silicosis and COVID-19, which is now very prominent in thinking in workplaces as they reopen.

So, I really encourage Fellows to step up and contribute, bringing your experience and knowledge to assist us in raising the profile of the specialty and assisting in training the next generation of occupational and environmental physicians. It really helps to highlight the huge variation in the type of work that our colleagues do and all the doors that are open to them to improve the health of workers and workplaces and promote the health benefits of good work.