The OEP provides an independent, expert evaluation of the patient. The OEP's extensive technical knowledge of the workplace enables them to provide an authoritative opinion on the patient's condition, and the steps which should be taken to manage the illness.

Inclusive approach
The OEP's assessment is comprehensive, including medical and non-medical causes and management. This approach enables the cause of the patient's concerns to be accurately identified and addressed, and allows management of the non-medical barriers to rehabilitation.

High-level communication skills
OEPs may work in a team environment, and are experts in communicating medical issues to physicians and non-physicians alike. In cases of work-related illness or injury, OEPs are specialists in setting the pace and direction of rehabilitation, and negotiating with employers and other stakeholders to achieve optimal outcomes. The OEP's knowledge of industry practice and the medical issues facing sub-populations allows them to provide authoritative advice to other members of the team.

Evidence-based assessment
OEPs are trained in evidence-based medicine, research methods, epidemiology, toxicology, ergonomics, worksite assessment, legislation and risk assessment. Their extensive knowledge of normal health, environmental factors and work places and practices makes the OEP an expert in determining the work and environment-relatedness of a health condition.

Sub-specialisation
OEPs may undertake further training in order to sub-specialise. OEP sub-specialties include: work as a treating specialist, corporate health, military medicine, musculo-skeletal medicine, toxicology, aviation medicine, transport medicine, underwater medicine or medico-legal medicine.

In what ways are OEPs shaping the health care system of the future?
Work and the environment are significant in the life of most adults, and all employees have the right to a safe and healthy working environment. Work-related illness and injury can have dramatic financial and social consequences, and have significant impacts on work productivity. The ageing population, rising healthcare costs, and the increasing cost of work-related disability all point to an increasing need for OEPs.

The prominence of environmental issues has increased recently, along with the appreciation of the impact of environmental issues on workers' health. This has correspondingly increased the demand for the specialised knowledge of environmental issues OEPs are able to provide.

At the present, there are over 500 OEPs practicing throughout Australia and New Zealand, in cities, towns and rural areas.
What is an Occupational and Environmental Physician?

Occupational and Environmental Physicians (OEPs) are highly trained medical specialists who provide services related to workers' and employers' health. The OEP's approach is holistic, recognising the health effects of occupational, social, psychological and environmental factors.

By addressing health within a broader context, the OEP is better able to provide a comprehensive and accurate assessment of the underlying causes of illness and disease. The OEP's distinctive approach also allows them to minimise the risk of further illness, injury or disease.

Some OEPs work for the government, the military or a large organisation. Work in private practice is common, providing services that include patient care for workers and employers. Experience in dealing with multiple parties and leading a positive outcome-focused approach distinguishes OEPs from other medical practitioners. The OEP's knowledge and skills include:

- broad education in managing a range of medical conditions in relation to patients' employment and environment
- exposure to a wide range of work-sites and work-practices, and training to assess these in terms of their potential effects on workers
- a thorough, logical and scientific approach to the provision of expert diagnoses, evidence and opinions
- ability to advise on the best prevention and management strategy for workplace injuries
- specialised management of work-related disability
- ability to care for patients within their work and social environment
- skill in clinical decision-making and cost-effective management of work-injury and sickness absence

What makes an OEP distinctive?

OEPs have a unique combination of workplace knowledge and specialist training and skills to deal with patients, other practitioners, and employers. Experience in dealing with multiple parties and leading a positive outcome-focused approach distinguishes OEPs from other medical practitioners. The OEP's knowledge and skills include:

- detailed technical knowledge of environmental factors, and their impact on health.

How do you become an OEP?

- After completion of a medical degree, a compulsory intern year in hospital, and at least two additional years of general medical experience, doctors who choose to specialise as OEPs must train in a specifically designed training program. The program is run by the Australasian Faculty of Occupational & Environmental Medicine, which is part of the Royal Australasian College of Physicians.

- After completion of a recognised diploma degree or masters level qualification in occupational health, the doctor enters a training program under the individual supervision of an OEP mentor. The mentor is an experienced OEP and provides advice and guidance throughout the program.

- Training is completed by fulfilling all competency and assessment requirements in a satisfactory manner. This includes include written and clinical examinations.

- Trainees can carry out the program on a part-time basis, and have up to ten years to complete the program.

- OEPs with an interest or expertise in a specific area of occupational medicine (such as toxicology or aviation medicine) may pursue further studies in a sub-specialty.

The Skills of an OEP

Technical skills

The OEP's technical knowledge enables them to provide authoritative opinions on complex occupational and environmental health issues. OEPs advise on:

- Physical factors, such as the impact of heat, cold and vibrations on workers' health
- Chemical factors, such as the risks of handling hazardous materials, and strategies for minimising exposure
- Biological factors, such as infectious diseases and how their spread can be contained
- Human factors, including ergonomics and the impact of shiftwork and fatigue. OEPs can also possess expert knowledge on psychosocial factors, such as the impact of harassment and discrimination.

Consultancy abilities

OEPs are skilled in the investigation and diagnosis of work-related and environment-related conditions, and provide a comprehensive approach to the management and prevention of illness, injury and disease. Patients are referred to OEPs by general practitioners, medical specialists, allied health staff, employer insurers, solicitors, unions, statutory bodies, and others. Referral may be for assessment and/or expert management advice.

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