



# President's address

**AFOEM ATM 17 May 2025**

**President.afoem@racp.edu.au**

**Dr Warren Harrex**

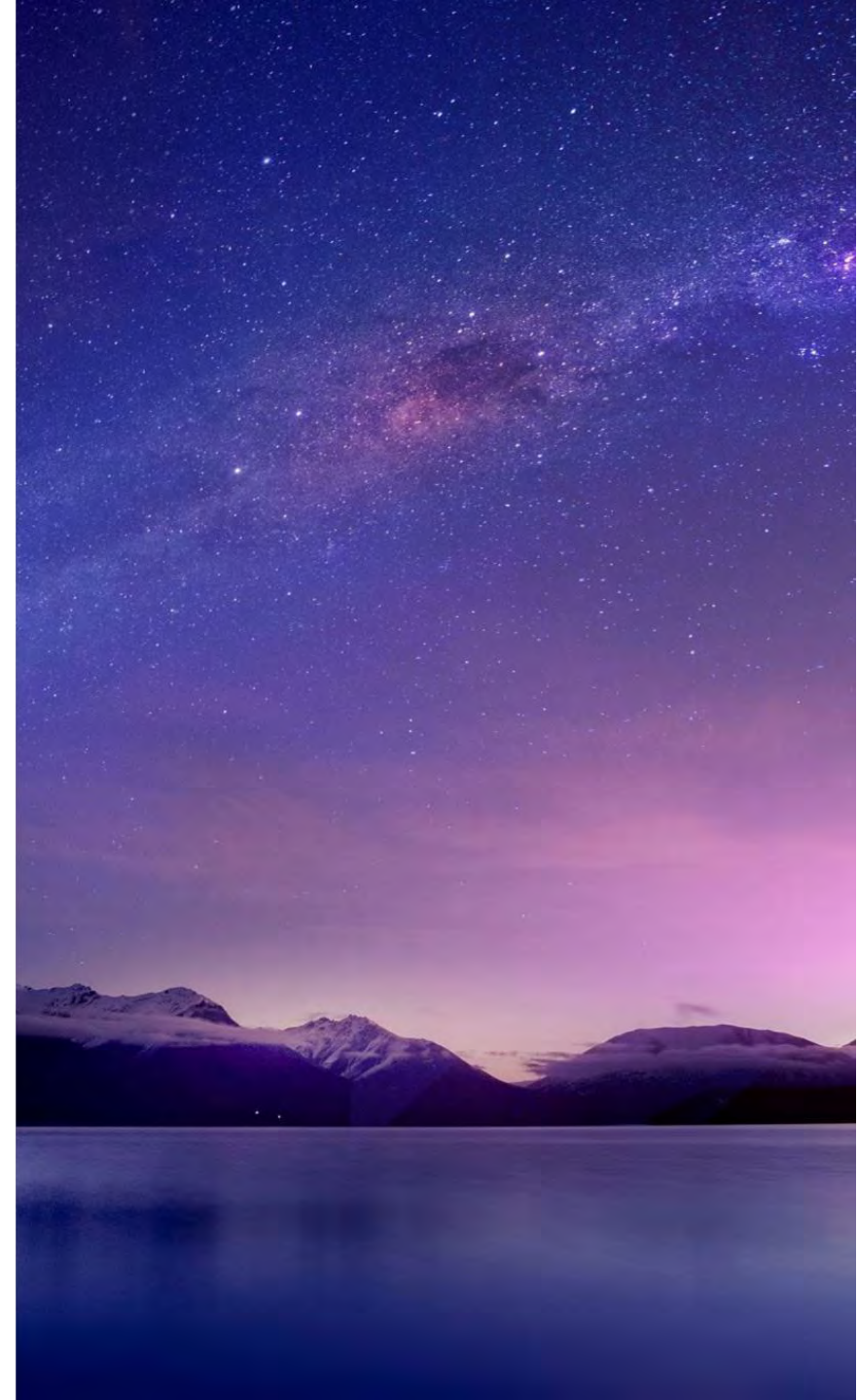
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# Welcome

MAKING HISTORY



LAST COHORT OF CURRENT  
TRAINING PROGRAM

# Why are you here?

Compulsory training?

Pass exam?

Why occupational and environmental medicine?

Easy specialty?

Lifestyle option?

Income?

Want to make a difference?



# Scope

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Scope of practice

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Approach to occupational  
and environmental  
medicine

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Workplace

health monitoring  
toxic workplaces

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Funds

# Scope of Practice

Occupational and Environmental Physicians [OEPs] are medical specialists with expertise in all aspects of the interface between physical and psychological health and work. This includes prevention, injury management with an emphasis on return to work, and worker rehabilitation.

OEPs work in diverse settings as clinicians, consultants, managers, advisers or researchers, largely outside hospitals. They can be engaged as individuals or employed within corporate or physician-operated health services or tertiary education/research facilities. They can lead multidisciplinary occupational health and wellbeing teams that operate within employer organisations.

OEPs have a focus on professionalism, leadership, care, integrity, communication, respect, and advocacy, including a key role in the provision of strategic advice about workplace and environmental risks to government and regulators.

# Main tasks

1. Diagnosis, management and assessment of the causation of diseases and injuries in relation to occupation and environmental factors.
2. Assessment of the health and fitness of workers for specific jobs or tasks.
3. Advocating for the protection and promotion of workers' physical and mental health and well-being
4. Developing, interpreting and application of medical standards for occupations
5. Coordination and management of occupational and environmental health and safety programs, including the delivery of occupational health services, health surveillance, health promotion and drug and alcohol testing programs in collaboration with other health professionals
6. Conducting workplace and preliminary environmental assessments in order to recognise, evaluate and control physical, chemical, biological, ergonomic and psychosocial hazards



# Main tasks (continued)

7. Coordinating and facilitating return to work and rehabilitation programs for injured or ill workers
8. Providing expert advice to workers, employers, regulators, and insurers on the relationship between work and illness and injuries
9. Advising on the health effects of physical, chemical, biological, psychosocial and ergonomic hazards in workplaces and measures to control them
10. Providing advice and education on occupational and environmental health issues to workers, employers, regulators and the public
11. Advising on the effect of major contemporary health issues in workplaces
12. Conducting research and contributing to the evidence base on occupational and environmental health topics

# What does the 'e' for environment mean in AFOEM?

- Health effects from industrial pollution
  - Known
    - Erin Brockovich - hexavalent chromium
    - Bhopal disaster - methyisocyanate (MIC)
    - Heavy metals – lead
  - Emerging
    - 'Forever' chemicals
      - PFAS and PFOS
    - Microplastics



# Nature of work keeps changing

- Current drivers
  - Dust diseases
  - Health monitoring
  - Worker health and well-being
- Fitness for work
  - Safety sensitive workers
- Work environment
  - Psychosocial risk
  - Work from home
  - Gig economy
- Workers compensation
  - Costs
  - Causation
  - At risk sectors
    - Health and services

# Importance of worksite visits

Learn clinical  
medicine at the  
bedside

Learn occupational  
and environmental  
medicine at the  
worksite.

# Three stages of being an occupational and environmental physician

Tradie



Consultant



Architect



# Clinical quality

- Clinical quality depends on interprofessional teamwork.
- Hence, leadership and management skills are needed at all levels
- Teaching of leadership has traditionally not equaled that of technical and academic competencies.

- Medical leadership: An important and required competency for medical students

- 

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5968745/>

# Medical leadership: applying your knowledge

Need to develop both management and leadership skills

Ability to transfer competencies to communication and critical thinking

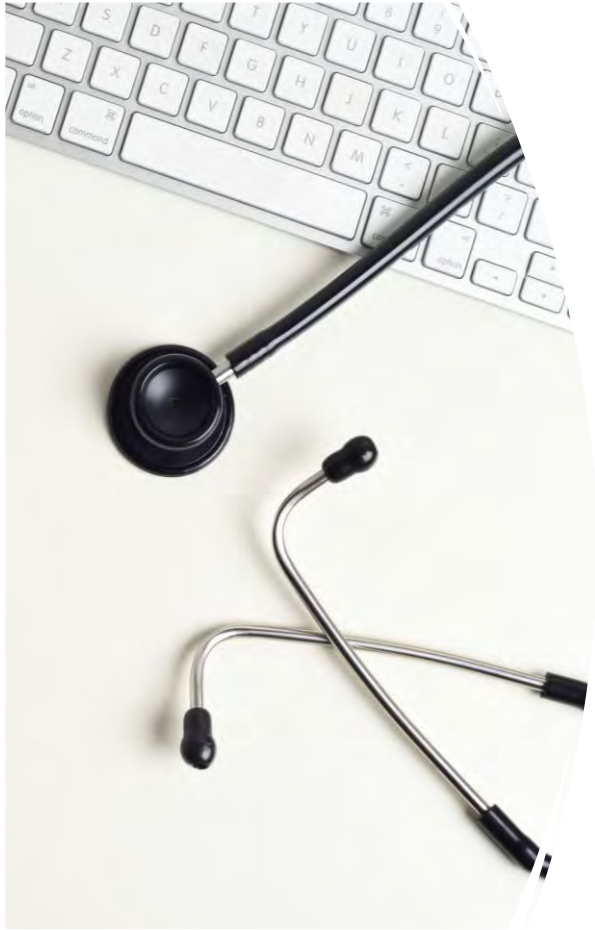
Need to develop skills in

- conflict resolution,
- sharing leadership,
- development of subordinates and succession planning,
- performance appraisal

# Purpose

- For whose benefit do we practice occupational and environmental medicine?





# Empowering patients

- Would you rather you didn't smoke?
- Do you drink more than is good for you?
- Are you concerned about your health?
- Are you concerned about your ability to work?





“I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

— Maya Angelou



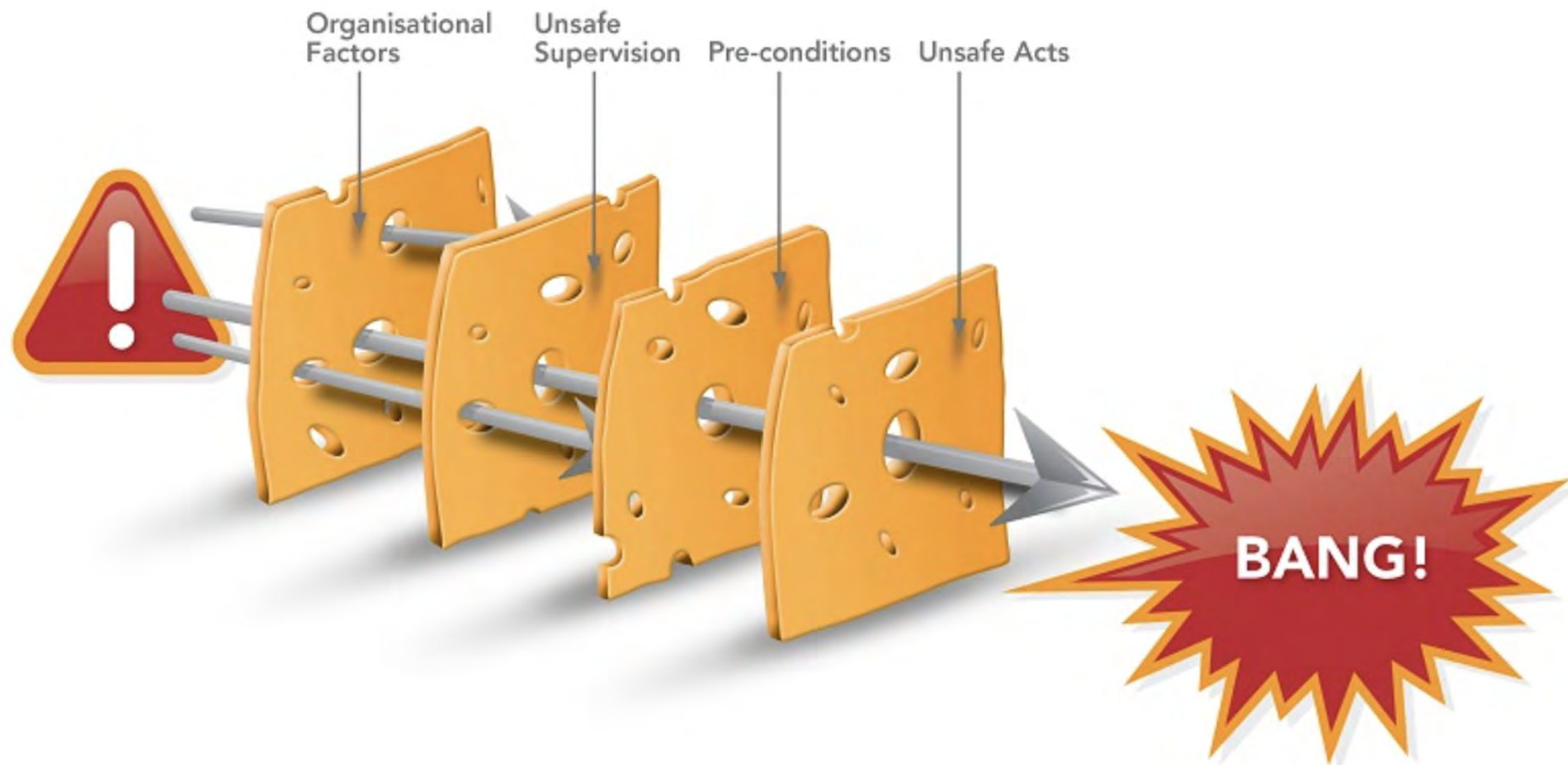
Sir Angus Houston AK AFC

# Approach to OEM issues

- Two important questions
  - What is the problem?
  - So what?



# REASONS 'SWISS CHEESE' MODEL



# Root cause analysis

- Why did this happen?
- What changes are required to prevent further incidents?
- 5 Whys
  - Simple and easy to use
  - Uncovers underlying causes
  - Promotes critical thinking
  - Focuses on prevention



A best practice incident management cycle

# Primary prevention

## The Ambulance Down in the Valley Joseph Malins (1895)

'Twas a dangerous cliff, as they freely confessed,  
Though to walk near its crest was so pleasant;  
But over its terrible edge there had slipped  
A duke and full many a peasant.  
So the people said something would have to be done,  
But their projects did not at all tally;  
Some said, "Put a fence 'round the edge of the cliff,"  
Some, "An ambulance down in the valley."





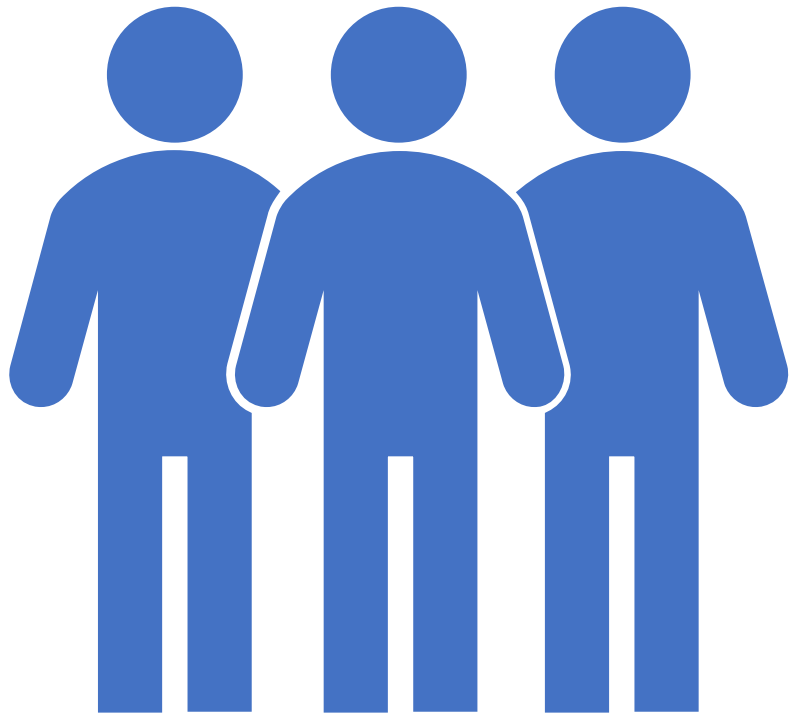
# Consider the outcomes



A risk assessment matrix titled "Risk Assessment" is shown. The matrix is a 5x5 grid with rows representing "Probability" and columns representing "Severity". The cells are color-coded: red for "Critical", orange for "High", yellow for "Medium", and green for "Low". A pair of black-rimmed glasses is resting on the top left of the matrix, and a black pen is resting on the bottom right.

Severity	Disaster	High	Medium	Minimal
Probability				
Regularly	Critical	Critical	High	Medium
Probable	Critical	High	Medium	Medium
Occasional	Critical	High	Medium	Low
Rarely	High	Medium	Medium	Low
Improbable	Medium	Medium	Low	Low

# The workplace





## Health monitoring

assessing a worker and recording information about their occupational exposure history, including:

- The type and name of the hazardous chemicals or other hazards they are exposed to
- The frequency, duration, and intensity of the exposure
- The tasks and activities that involve the exposure
- The control measures that are in place to reduce the exposure, such as ventilation, isolation, substitution, or engineering controls
- The use and maintenance of personal protective equipment (PPE), such as gloves, masks, goggles, or aprons
- The adequacy and recency of training and information on how to work safely with hazards
- The symptoms or signs of health effects that may be related to the exposure
- The medical history and current health status of the worker
- Review worker's records of previous health monitoring, if available, and compare them with the current results

## Resources Safety and Health Queensland suspends spirometry company after black lung testing bungle

ABC Tropical North / By Scout Wallen and Danielle Jesser

Posted Thu 9 May 2024 at 5:45am

Exclusive National NSW Hunter Valley tragedy

## Hunter Valley bus driver addicted to drugs, took pills before fatal crash



Perry Duffin

Updated May 8, 2024 — 1.17pm, first published at 10.08am

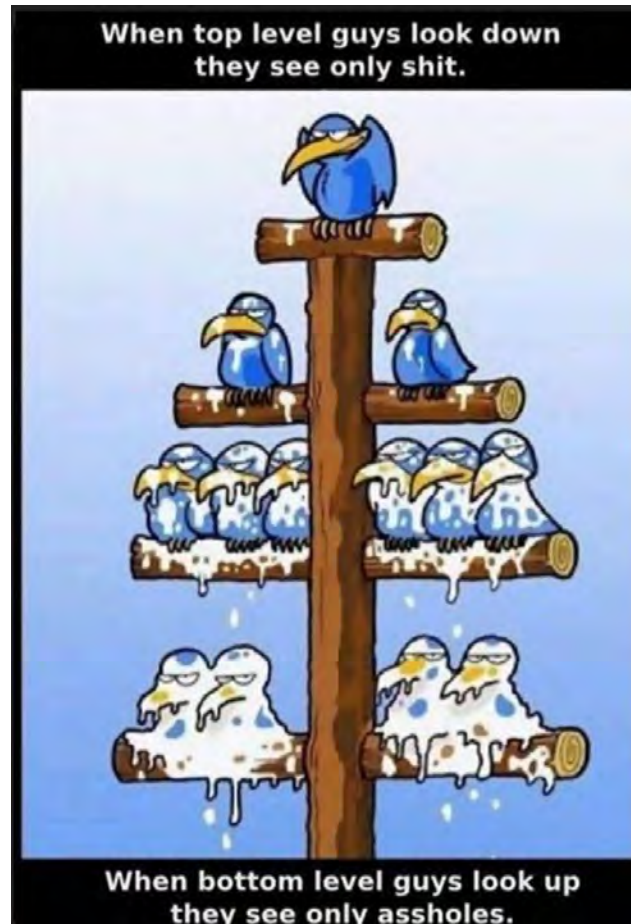
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Print

Hunter Valley bus driver Brett Button was affected by prescription drugs when he was behind the wheel of the vehicle that crashed and tragically killed 10 wedding guests.

# Toxic workplaces



## 10 CALL CENTER PROBLEMS (AND HOW TO SOLVE THEM)

 novocall

- |   |                                |
|---|--------------------------------|
| 1 | High employee turnover         |
| 2 | Balancing competing priorities |
| 3 | Low first call resolution      |
| 4 | High levels of stress          |
| 5 | Lack of employee engagement    |
| 6 | Over-reliance on call scripts  |

And more...



# A workplace with clear direction but poor management



Manager imposing his will

# Will adding programs change the culture?



Employee assistance programs

Mental health support

Immunisation programs

Health and well-being programs

Resilience training

More remuneration

Geographic cures?

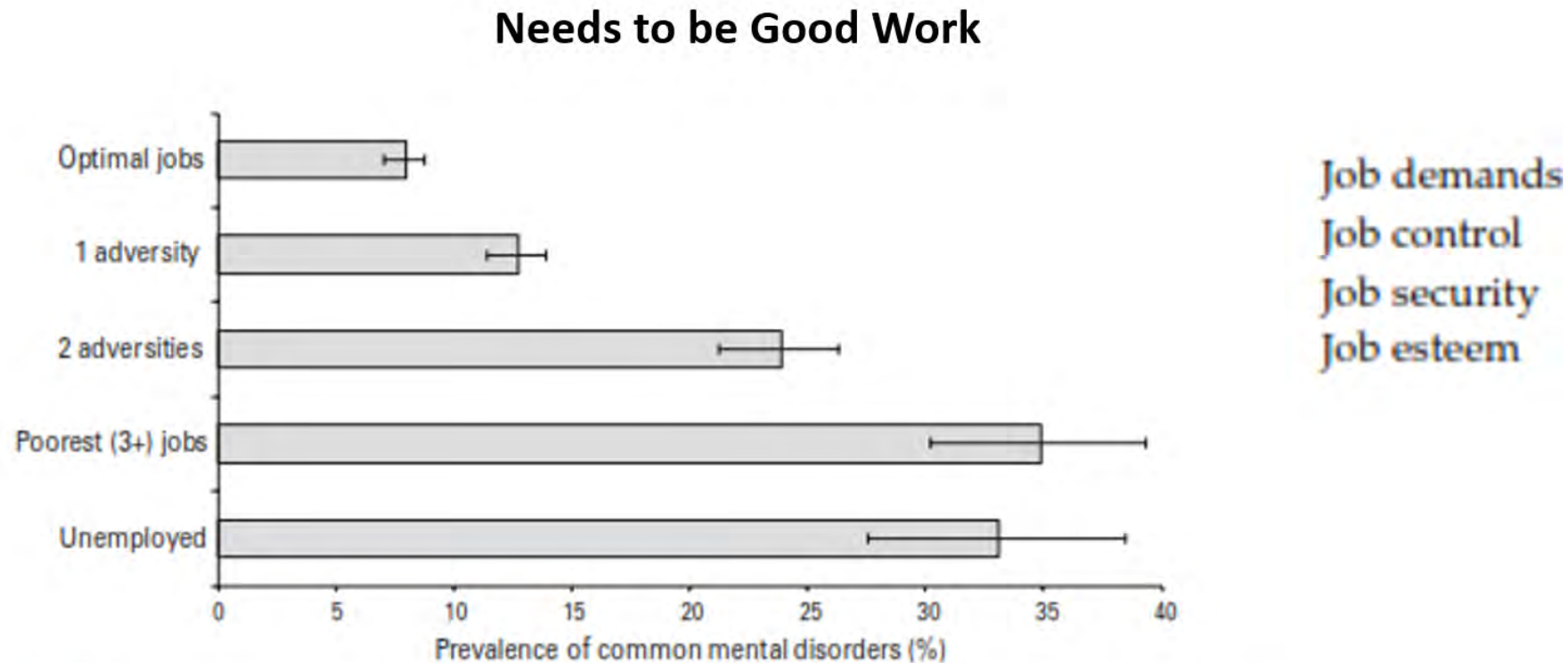
# Three questions – quick risk assessment for return to work



- Do you like your job?
  - Do you get on with your boss?
  - Is what you do appreciated?
- 
- Örebro Musculoskeletal Pain Screening Questionnaire (Short-form)(Linton et al, 2010)



# Common mental disorders and work



**Fig. 1.** Prevalence of common mental disorders (and standard errors) by employment circumstances.



# Some useful management tips - psychosocial risk

- Psychosocial issues lead to GP consultations and then mental health diagnoses – mis-labelled as the workers problem
- Often we see **normal** reactions of **normal** people to **abnormal** situations
- Perceived or actual loss of status is a major stressor on a worker.
- No rights or wrongs - people have choices - and are accountable for the consequences
- In any dispute between two people: least blameworthy is still 40% responsible
- Blame is the avoiding of taking personal responsibility
- Substance dependence is common – look for it
- Sadness is common, and illness and injury are accompanied by a degree of sadness or grief
- If you feel you are being manipulated, you usually are

# AFOEM Endowment Fund



- Registrar Travel Fellowship
- Research Development Grant
- Education Development Grant

# AFOEM Registrar Travel Fellowship

**Purpose:** To provide the opportunity for an AFOEM registrar to undertake overseas study in an aspect of occupational and environmental medicine. The Fellowship can be used for both education and research but doesn't require the trainee to establish a research project uniquely for the award. The funds can be used to:

- travel to appropriate settings overseas
- an occupational and environmental medicine attachment
- actively participate in a conference or scientific meeting, for example as a member of a panel or to present a paper or poster

**Value:** Up to AUD\$10,000.

**Eligibility:** Australian and Aotearoa New Zealand registrars of the Australasian Faculty of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, who reside in Australia or Aotearoa New Zealand at the time of their application.

**Tenable:** Outside your country of residence.

**Special requirements:** The successful applicant will be required to complete a report within 6 months of the completing their Fellowship for publication in the AFOEM eBulletin and/or on the RACP website.

Read the [terms and conditions](#) carefully before submitting your application.

**This Fellowship is supported by the Australasian Faculty of Occupational and Environmental Medicine Endowment Fund.**

Applications open 17 June to 31 July 2025.

<https://www.racp.edu.au/foundation/research-awards-and-career-grants/travel-grants>

# RACP AFOEM Research Development Grant

**Purpose:** To support and encourage research in the field of occupational and environmental medicine.

Applicants can undertake a short-term or part-time research project, such as to fulfil the research requirement for their training or Fellowship. The funding can be used to provide:

- stipend support
- other support such as laboratory set-up costs
- funding for a short-term research assistant

**Value:** Up to AUD\$30,000 for 1 year.

**Eligibility:** Australian and Aotearoa New Zealand Fellows and trainees of the Australasian Faculty of Occupational and Environmental Medicine.

**Tenable:** Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand and overseas.

Read the [terms and conditions](#) carefully before submitting your application.

**This Grant is supported by the Australasian Faculty of Occupational and Environmental Medicine Endowment Fund.**

Applications for funding in 2026 open 17 June to 31 July 2025.

<https://www.racp.edu.au/foundation/research-awards-and-career-grants/research-development-grants>

# RACP AFOEM Education Development Grant

**Purpose:** To support and encourage further educational training or develop educational initiatives in occupational and environmental medicine. The grant can go towards:

- gaining new technical expertise in a field relevant to occupational or environmental medicine
- training at an institution in one or more of the AFOEM competencies
- providing further education opportunities for a group, for example webinar support or a lecture

**Requirement:** Applicants must submit a budget outlining the funding they require.

**Value:** Up to AUD\$10,000.

**Eligibility:** Fellows and trainees of the Australasian Faculty of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (AFOEM).

**Tenable:** Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand or overseas.

Apply now

Applications open 3 March to 7 April 2025.

The Grant is made possible through funds provided by Fellows of the Australasian Faculty of Occupational and Environmental Medicine.

# Webinars sites you might find useful

- [Medflix | RACP Online Learning](#)
- [Society of Occupational Medicine | Occupational Health – ANZSOM](#)
  - (member access to two journals)
- [Meducation – Your Premier Medical Specialists Centre in Sydney](#) (\$)