VIEWPOINT

The Scope of International Occupational Medical Practice

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The international physician has a tremendous scope of responsibility. Clinical care and its management, occupational and environmental medicine, travel medicine, marine and aviation medicine, public health and other disciplines must be addressed. Programmes must include expatriates, national citizens, travellers, families, extended families, and the surrounding communities. Moreover, in the international context, the occupational physician is a representative of the company in the host country. Furthermore, the knowledge required is not only vast, but changes rapidly. It requires not only clinical acumen, but also the ability to effectively design and implement many types of programmes in the context of the customs and regulations of the country and with the guidance of management.

Key words: International occupational medicine; international environmental medicine.

INTRODUCTION

One of the fastest growing areas in occupational medicine is international occupational and environmental medicine. The role of an occupational physician with international responsibilities is both diverse and dynamic. The days of the international physician serving only as clinical support for expatriates have passed. Whether serving at a single site, or having country, regional, continental or global responsibilities, the international physician must have knowledge of and commitment to multiple disciplines.

SCOPE OF INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMMES

In most countries, but especially developing countries, physicians working for industry will not only have the traditional responsibilities of occupational physicians in the United States and Western Europe, but will also have significant clinical/clinical management responsibilities. The responsibility will include the clinical care of the employee and commonly the spouse and children of the employee. Servants, extended family and the community are also often included in these responsibilities.

The occupational physician will also have responsibilities for occupational programmes related to workplace exposures and risks. Medical surveillance programmes, as well as pre-employment and periodic examinations, are critical programme components.

Designing appropriate health promotion/prevention programmes is another major responsibility. In the international health arena, these prevention programmes will include issues that are additional to the lifestyle issues commonly considered in the United States or Western Europe. Infectious diseases require a systematic approach for the provision of vaccination and chemoprophylaxis. Preventive educational programmes include those relating to food, water and bloodborne pathogens and general sanitation. Accident prevention programmes must be considered due to the fivefold excess risk for traffic-related deaths in many developing countries. Special issues such as evacuation and emergency care must be given detailed scrutiny and appropriate programmes implemented. Environmental exposure to chemicals and physical hazards must be assessed and appropriate measures taken.

CLINICAL PROGRAMME DEVELOPMENT AND SUPPORT

The clinical programmes to be developed will include out-patient, emergency, in-patient and intensive care management of expatriates and national employees. Dental care is often also included. It is necessary to integrate the organization’s medical programmes with the existing health system, regulations and customary practice. Regular reviews of programmes should be conducted and reports issued to relevant company staff. The significant cost of evacuation and repatriation must always be considered in programme design and review. Cost-effectiveness of programmes should be addressed at each review. If a programme is regional — particularly when affiliates may be small — a physician should be designated in each area/country and guidelines for referral and evacuation established for that region’s programme. The recent emergence of global health insurers and managed care into the international setting requires a careful integration of medical care directly provided by the company and health benefits provided externally.
PROGRAMME SUPPORT

Programme support may include special regional programmes for epidemic diseases such as AIDS, or for environmental exposure to chemicals or heavy metals. Special programmes may be requested to assure a safe blood supply and to procure and transport medical supplies and pharmaceuticals.

TRAVEL MEDICINE

An ancillary focus for international occupational physicians is travel medicine. The safety of short-term or rotational travellers requires special knowledge of the indicated vaccinations and other preventive programmes on a global basis. In addition to recommended vaccinations, a knowledge of medical requirements for visas is imperative. Many countries require serological testing or chest X-rays, and some countries may consider any significant medical condition in the decision to issue a visa for employment.

Psychological support both of expatriate and national employees is often challenging. Employee assistance programmes may be extended to expatriates and special support given to family members. Drug and alcohol programmes should be considered within the social context of the country.