‘What occupation does the patient follow?’

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Preface
All occupational physicians are aware of the ground-breaking work of Ramazzini. The following article was written by the author following a visit to the University of Padua. Ramazzini was clearly ahead of his time not only in recognizing the broad range of workplace hazards and adverse health effects, but also in his recognition of the importance of a multidisciplinary approach to occupational health.

Occupational health was in the forefront of Professor Bernadino Ramazzini’s mind at the University of Padua, when he proposed that doctors should ask this question. In his book De Morbis Artificum, which was published in 1713 [1], Ramazzini believed that occupational hazards were responsible in large part for the ill-health of artisans or workers. He had uncovered these causal links by conversations with workers. By his diligent investigations he became one of the first ergonomist/epidemiologists with a strong interest in occupational health.

In 1713, doctors in Padua were not much concerned with the health of workers, many of whom did filthy jobs in unspeakable conditions. Ramazzini had become impressed by the many poisoning and respiratory diseases amongst this group, which he began to associate with toxic chemicals used in manufacturing processes. He was also concerned about many of the issues that also concern today’s ergonomists and occupational health doctors. He was aware of the plight of workers who stood all day or worked in bent and twisted positions; of the lack of task variability; and of the static working posture of sedentary workers. He even identified psychological stress.

Although substantial evidence of these issues was published by Ramazzini in 1713, it was another 160 years before Statutory Provision for workers became law in Britain and over 200 years before miners’ respiratory diseases became accepted as a medical fact.

Professor Ramazzini conducted his investigation into the epidemiology of workers’ diseases because he was concerned that men were being injured by their work. Modern industry would do well to fully embrace his ideas, and current methods should be sufficiently well designed to prevent injury, as far as is reasonably possible.

References and further reading