ALAMA: 25 years young

This issue of Occupational Medicine includes a number of original papers concerning the occupational health of local government employees. Vaz and Bharathi [1] consider physical activity in teachers, Mier et al. [2] consider the treadmill test in firefighters and Lloyd [3] presents a case of coronary artery dissection in a firefighter. In addition, Davies et al. [4] examine ill-health retirement decision making by occupational physicians working for local authority fire and police services. A forthcoming issue of Occupational Medicine will publish the revised local authority ill-health retirement guidelines initially published in this journal [5], a paper which remains one of the most accessed in the journal’s history.

Local government is a major employer in the UK and a growth area in recent years for the employment of occupational physicians. This year sees the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Association for Local Authority Medical Advisors (ALAMA). The idea for such an organization came from a symposium on Inhalation Hazards in Firemen held in Edinburgh in March 1979. There was a follow-up meeting for local authority doctors in Manchester in April 1980, at which an ALAMA steering committee was formed and annual meetings were initiated. The declared aims of the Association were to hold an annual meeting, to develop some kind of link with the Society of Occupational Medicine, the Faculty of Occupational Medicine and the British Medical Association, to keep members informed of work and developments of mutual interest relating to local authority work and to coordinate the work of local authority doctors to avoid wide discrepancies in the medical advice given to the various Authorities. In all of these respects, it can be argued that the original aims of the Association have been met admirably.

Physicians advising local, fire and police authorities are frequently employed on a sessional basis. In experience and qualifications, they range from the general practitioner with an interest in occupational medicine to an accredited, specialist occupational physician. The size of the authority may vary from a small town council employing a couple of hundred people to a large metropolitan council with several thousand employees. The occupational hazards range from firefighting, landscape management, pest control, and waste and refuse disposal through residential care to the stresses of teaching and social work. Local authority physicians often work in isolation, and the comradeship of ALAMA provides an excellent forum for support and education, and is an essential resource for information on relevant occupational health matters. There have been a number of milestones in ALAMA’s first twenty-five years.

ALAMA has had a major input in the development of consistent guidance on medical standards of fitness for firefighters and police officers. The Association is represented on the appropriate national committees of the police and fire services. Such involvement has been reflected in the new Occupational Health Strategy for the Police Force and in the recommendations for vision and hearing standards for the fire service. ALAMA is represented on a number of government advisory committees relating to all aspects of our local authority work.

The medical criteria for ill-health retirement have been clearly defined in the ALAMA Local Government Pension Scheme ill-health retirement guidelines [5]. These guidelines have improved the consistency of medical decisions about ill-health retirement considerably and have had an impact on other pension schemes as well. The government and employers widely acknowledge them as a benchmark for making decisions about early pensionable retirement due to permanent ill-health. ALAMA recently supported the Employers Organisation for Local Authorities in the preparation and publication of the Management of Ill Health Handbook, which has become the bible of best practice for all personnel and human resources departments in local authorities [6].

The ALAMA website (www.alama.org.uk) was set up in 1999, and gives members exclusive access to a discussion forum and is a resource of shared information. The forum allows a member to seek help and guidance from colleagues on a particular issue. Sometimes, when many members contribute to a particular discussion, it represents a summary of ‘best practice’. Members are encouraged to post policies and procedures documents in the Exchange and Library sections of the website, enabling others to access the information. This is particularly beneficial to sessional physicians working in the smaller Authorities.

ALAMA now holds two conferences a year. Originally, the spring conference was for local authority doctors and the autumn conference was devoted to fire and police issues. In the last few years, the programme of both conferences has been selected to have relevance to all doctors in the sector. From time to time, ALAMA and ANHOPs (Association of National Health Service Occupational Physicians) have held a joint conference to mutual benefit. In addition to subjects of clinical interest at these events, we share best practice within our field of work. ALAMA originated at a meeting similar to these conferences and they still provide the core of the organizational activities of the Association, allowing
colleagues to interact with each other in a relaxed and convivial environment sharing ideas and problems. These conferences are often the stimulus for initiatives that are to the benefit of all working in local authorities, the fire service and the police force.

Whilst most ALAMA members belong to the Society of Occupational Medicine, it is not a prerequisite of joining. ALAMA supports the aims and objectives of the Society, and strives to implement them within its own industrial and commercial sector. The two organizations complement one another and have much to gain from mutual cooperation in the future. The achievements of ALAMA, its important guidelines and guidance documents, and its well-attended biannual meetings and vibrant internet forum in the first twenty-five years suggest that the next twenty-five will be every bit as successful.

John Sorrell
ALAMA chairman

References