OCCUPATIONAL MEDICINE IN AUSTRALIA

What work takes place in your country?
The tripartite National Occupational Health and Safety Strategy identified the following five industrial sectors as priorities from an occupational health and safety perspective: agriculture forestry and fishing, construction, health and community services, manufacturing, mining and transport/storage.

What are the key occupational diseases?
The most common work-related conditions are musculoskeletal disorders, psychological disorders and noise-induced hearing loss [1]. Respiratory diseases, infectious diseases, dermatitis and cancer result in far fewer compensation claims. However, this source of data probably underestimates the occurrence of occupational diseases.

How is occupational health provided?
Most occupational physicians work in private practice or for independent health services. Some work within industry either employed by companies directly or engaged as contractors. A few work within hospitals, where the focus is primarily or exclusively on hospital employees, rather than community members or industry. A few work within the Armed Services and within Government regulatory agencies—mostly in Departments of Health or Labour.

Who provides the services?
In Australia, there are about 270 specialists in occupational and environmental medicine. General practitioners with an interest in occupational medicine also work for industry or for independent health services.

How is occupational health represented?
Specialist training in occupational and environmental medicine is conducted under the auspices of the Australasian Faculty of Occupational and Environmental Medicine of the Royal Australasian College of Physicians. Fellowship of the Faculty is the Australasian specialist qualification (FAFOEM). The Faculty also undertakes continuing education, with the Annual Scientific Meeting being a major event on the calendar, rotated through the Australian state capitals and New Zealand. The Australian and New Zealand Society of Occupational Medicine provides a forum for those interested in occupational medicine.

What legislation do you have that impacts on the provision of occupational health?
Regulation of occupational health is undertaken by State Governments rather than the Federal Government. The legislation concerning workplace safety and health generally contains a Roben’s style approach to risk management combined with some prescriptive legislation. There is also legislation for workers compensation. The Australian Safety and Compensation Council (ASCC) through a partnership with government, unions and industry coordinates national efforts in occupational health and safety, but is an authoritative advisory agency rather than a regulatory authority.

What about research and education?
The most substantial academic unit at present is the Monash Centre for Occupational and Environmental Health within the Department of Epidemiology and Preventive Medicine at Monash University in Melbourne. This centre is directed by Malcolm Sim. A proposal to establish an Australian Centre for Occupational and Environmental Medicine at the University of Western Australia in Perth has been raised recently and hopefully this will be successful. Some universities have researchers active in occupational and environmental medicine despite having no academic unit devoted to the specialty.

The Australasian Faculty sets training requirements, facilitates supervision of trainees and conducts the Fellowship examination. The Faculty also operates a Maintenance of Professional Standards program for Fellows.

What has your country contributed to the advancement of the speciality?
The establishment of the Faculty put the speciality on a solid footing. There is certainly a need for more academic units within the medical schools but there has been considerable research undertaken by existing units and dedicated individuals. Occupational physicians have helped develop rigorous systems—many of which have been implemented by Government Departments or multinational corporations.

Links
AFOEM—http://afom.racp.edu.au/

A. M. Donoghue
Chief Medical Officer, Alcoa of Australia, PO Box 252, Applecross, WA 6953, Australia
e-mail: Michael.Donoghue@alcoa.com.au

References