In this issue of Occupational Medicine

Lost tribes

The leading editorial by Dr Bill Gunnyeon concisely summarizes some of the key developmental opportunities for occupational medicine as a profession but also outlines the challenges of cultural change in relation to the important interaction between health and work in modern day society [1]. It is of note that he emphasizes the importance of working together with our partners in healthcare both in terms of developing and using the evidence and research but also in terms of delivering these messages.

The challenge to education is emphasized in the paper by Kevan Thorley and Raymond Agius [2]. The Occupational and Environmental Health Research Group have evaluated national development models for general practitioners (GPs). I suspect it is with some disappointment that the authors report that although the modules for e-learning have been freely provided and modified to accommodate feedback from GPs, there remains a low level of uptake across GPs in the UK currently for this mode of learning.

This contrasts with findings from the study of a small group of Welsh GPs carried out by Cohen and colleagues [3]. The purpose was to evaluate current practice in relation to assessment of fitness for work within a general practice consultation. The paper highlights understandable areas of concern from GPs regarding their role in relation to management of fitness for work. They are being asked to engage with the agenda of providing competent and accessible advice for workplaces in relation to occupational health and fitness to work. However, there are clearly some major challenges in supporting professionals to develop an understanding of the importance of their role in this as well as gaining the confidence to undertake these interventions. An area where occupational health practitioners themselves may be able to contribute directly is in providing the expert advice necessary for the development of evidence-based guidelines.

Hashtroudi and Paterson [4] reviewed 31 published guidelines and disappointingly, although not surprisingly, aspects relating to rehabilitation were infrequently referred to. When they were, they rarely offered advice on the impact of disease on work, work on disease, or fitness to work and modifications. There were only two sets of guidelines which had involved occupational health practitioners and it is therefore beholden upon us as a specialty to put ourselves forward, step up to the mark and make ourselves available to assist in support in the development of these important pieces of work.

The challenge is great as can be seen from the broad spectrum of issues covered in the short series of papers relating to the work of veterinary practice and also the challenges associated with offshore work.

The paper by D’Souza [5] reports the findings of a Health and Safety Executive based survey relating to provision of occupational health and safety advice to small animal veterinary practices. The Australian veterinarians paper by Fritschi [6] demonstrates some of the major challenges associated with large animal work in remote and rural conditions. Bartram et al. [7,8] have presented two papers looking at UK vets and find increased ‘at risk’ alcohol behaviours and higher risks of work-related stress for demands and lack of managerial support.

In her summarizing editorial ‘It shouldn’t happen to a vet’, Pamela Mosdale [9] emphasized that a number of issues have been addressed by the British Small Animal Veterinary Association and British Veterinary Hospitals Association in order to expand best practice standards for veterinary practice. They have also recognized the importance of supporting practitioners in the workplace through provision of 24-h helplines and the veterinary surgeons health support programme. It remains, however, of some concern that as few as 14% of veterinary practices sought advice from doctors or nurses qualified in occupational medicine.

It seems that the challenge for 2009 and beyond is to embrace the opportunities of government initiatives in improving the health and wellbeing of the working population by drawing on knowledge and skills of some of the lost tribes of occupational medicine.

Liz Murphy
Honorary Assistant Editor

References