Why I became an occupational physician...

One year after qualifying in 1972 I was invited to join the staff of a large London church where I worked for 3 years keeping my stethoscope warm in part time General Practice. During that time I founded a Christian professional theatre company which ran for 7 years with a permanent theatre in central London and a touring element performing regularly at the Edinburgh Festival. In returning to medicine, I needed a nine-to-five job in order to continue managing the theatre. Occupational Medicine fitted the bill and although initially boring with routine medicals, a career full of fascination developed. Most companies seem to have been British (Petroleum, Airways and Broadcasting Corporation!) The patient with the most dangerous job was Al Capone’s driver (before reasonable adjustments came in!).

The most intriguing study was hooking up the BBC Symphony Orchestra members with portable ECG’s in the Royal Festival Hall and matching the ECG output against the complexity of the score. A significant finding was an ergonomic one that the cellists had a marked tachycardia six bars before the trombones behind them were due to come in! The CMO Dr Ann Fingret introduced me to Steve Williams, the first organizational psychologist to develop a validated stress questionnaire assessment and thus my career-long interest in the psychology of the workplace was born.

The most scary moment was presenting to a paying public audience in Central Hall, Westminster, on workplace aspects of migraine.

I have enjoyed a rich variety of workplaces and some seriously helpful mentors. Belonging to a small speciality, I count myself fortunate to have been working with colleagues and friends who are prepared to pioneer unusual areas combining clinical and business expertise. Tropical disease training with British Airways has led to a global perspective with International SOS developing Occupational Health training in a worldwide context. The group (IAPOS) founded 35 years ago by Dr Stanley Browne, world famous leprologist who drew together Chief Medical Officers of global companies, Mission and NGO doctors and tropical disease specialists, has been a particular stimulation.

The need for people with good medical and managerial skills is as great as ever, particularly if they have the courage to make it fun as well. As a speciality we continue to need those who dare to be different and have the courage of their convictions.

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