Why I became an occupational physician...

I had always been interested in work and how to avoid it, so with the value of hindsight a career in occupational medicine was not that unlikely. The decision to pursue a career in occupational medicine came during my early postgraduate days. I can remember as an undergraduate being taught to ask the patient about their occupation, but had no other exposure to the specialty.

Without any clear game plan other than to get as far away from the war zone that was Belfast in the early 80s, I drifted towards general practice. I still believed that a career in general practice would be great, but as I finished my GP trainee year in 1985, I began to doubt that it was really for me. Job offers from Saudi Arabia and Canada quickly followed and as I contemplated them I was unexpectedly offered a partnership in the best practice in my local town. If I did not like it here I reasoned I would not like it anywhere.

Within the first year as a GP partner, I realized I had definitely chosen the wrong career. The nature of the work plus the lack of support wore me down. The practice I joined had traditionally provided occupational health services to many of the local employers. Twice a week I performed a GP clinic in a branch surgery in the grounds of the Moygashel factory for the family and workers of the linen mill. Increasingly I undertook the occupational health work in the practice and found that I enjoyed it, though my level of competence was low.

In 1987 I undertook the distance learning course through Manchester University. This set me on a course of full-time work in occupational medicine, and in 1989, I joined the Post Office occupational health team. I count it a privilege to have worked under Dr Richard Welch who was chief medical officer at the time and Dr Steve Searle his deputy. Both men taught me much. I stayed with the Post Office for five enjoyable years before going to Bombardier Aerospace.

The question is why did I become an occupational physician? I think I can sum that up in two words, interest and opportunity. My interest grew while in general practice and fortunately the opportunity presented itself. Dr Richard Welch stands out as the individual who was most influential in my development as an occupational physician. He gave me an opportunity to work in a highly professional OH unit while I was still very much at the incompetently incompetent end of the spectrum.

I have worked full-time in occupational medicine since 1989 and have enjoyed every day of it. I have had the privilege to ask thousands of employees, ‘what do you do?’ and to greet the answer with more insight as each year passes. Not many careers can be as fulfilling and varied as occupational medicine.

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