

Choosing occupational health as a career

Information, advice and guidance

Occupational health professionals make a real difference to the health of workers. Research shows that good health is good for business and better workplaces have better financial results. Occupational health (OH) is a rewarding and interesting career - and one that allows a good work / life balance.



Suzanne Douglas - Senior Staff Health Advisor (Oxfam)

"My top tips for someone new to OH are to get as much practical experience as possible and to find a good mentor. Also, be prepared to do lots of research and reading!"

Jane Williams - Occupational Health Advisor (NHS)

"My advice to anyone new to OH would be to read around the speciality first, get a good contemporary OH book and join relevant groups / forums. If possible, shadow another OH practitioner and read the RCN OH nurses competencies for reference."

Dr Paul Davies - Occupational Health Physician (Various)

"Over the years, a number of practitioners have helped me shape my career and fine-tune my skills, it's important to be open minded and to let opportunities develop your interests."

Martin Jelfs - Occupational Health Psychotherapist (Independent)

"My key piece of advice to someone starting out in OH psychotherapy is to understand the dynamics of the organisation they're working for, as well as the conflicting pressures and demands on the staff. This helps maintain a balanced perspective."



Introduction

Career prospects in occupational health (OH) are excellent with a shortage of professionals in the field.

OH professionals:

- **Advise on the effects of work on health and health on work**
- **Contribute to workplace policy development**
- **Visit workplaces to advise on health**
- **Assess the fitness of employees to undertake specific tasks**
- **Recommend relevant adjustments that may be required in the workplace to support people with disabilities to undertake their job role**
- **Monitor the health of employees by undertaking ongoing health surveillance and health monitoring, particularly for employees who work with certain chemicals, materials and could be exposed to noise or vibration as a result of work processes**
- **Assess individual cases of injuries and illnesses and develop return to work strategies**
- **Provide training to organisations and their managers on how to make the best from OH services**
- **Engage with organisations to assess the effectiveness of delivery of OH services and look for ways to bridge gaps between business needs and OH provision**

Occupational health professionals make a real difference to the health of workers. Research shows that good health is good for business and better workplaces have better financial results. Occupational Health (OH) is a rewarding and interesting career - and one that allows a good work / life balance.

They also have an understanding of employment and anti-discrimination legislation as well as environmental and health and safety law.

At the Society of Occupational Medicine (SOM), we believe work should be seen as a health outcome. Employment and health form a virtuous circle: suitable work can be good for your health, and good health means that you are more likely to be, and stay, employed.

OH teams work with managers and human resource personnel to help to keep people well at work – physically and mentally. If there are problems, either with the workplace or with an employee's fitness, the OH professional's role is to advise on adjustments to the workplace and / or to give appropriate advice and support to the employee.

OH professionals assess employees who are injured or become ill at work by:

- **Providing advice on health education, health and safety and sickness absence**
- **Carrying out risk assessments in conjunction with the health and safety team**
- **Managing employee health records and statistics**

They may work alone or as part of a team of health experts. They may work in a large organisation (like a hospital, local authority, the military) or for a private OH firm used by smaller employers. They may also set up their own OH business or become self-employed. With experience, there are opportunities to progress to a management position, leading a team of OH staff, running an OH centre or sitting on a board advising on the integration of employee wellbeing into the overall business strategy.

Career vignettes

Clare Haddow

Occupational Health Advisor

Having newly qualified as a nurse I worked as a school nurse at Dulwich College in 1983; it was the first time I thought about people at work and their jobs. This was the catalyst for my decision to study for the Occupational Health Nursing Certificate at Manchester Polytechnic in 1984. My husband decided to do an MBA at the London Business School, so I adapted my OH skills to work as a housemistress for a Kent boarding school while giving us a roof over our head as my husband studied. The Headmaster recognised my OH qualifications and paid for me to study at Christchurch in Canterbury; I completed a Certificate in Health Education, so I could develop their Personal and Social Education programme for 11-18 year old girls. After my husband's MBA and a move north, I continued working in OH setting up a new service for BBC North working on a part-time basis with six local radio stations and two TV centres.

My husband's job moved us from Ilkley to Bristol, and I worked for Wincanton Distribution (part-time) covering the south-west. I then realised with three children under five a more local job was required. I worked part-time for BUPA Hospital in Bristol developing their OH service. We then moved to Chile for just under three years and I studied with the Open University and obtained a Certificate and Diploma in Business Management. I continued to study on home leave by attending OH study days and receiving the OH magazine posted to Santiago.

Returning from Chile in 2001 I worked for BBC South West (part-time) and then the Environment Agency (part-time) before going to work for a large UK bank. I left the bank to set up my own business in 2003 to allow me to have a work-life balance with our three children. I now work full-time for my own company with a great team of Associates and learning all the time about the OH needs of a wide range of businesses. There are so many possibilities in OH and never a dull moment. OH is a profession that allows you to adapt to life's needs and develop to where one wants to go within the profession.

Christine Poulter

Occupational Health Advisor

Having already spent 12 and a half years in higher education, gaining nursing, midwifery, public health and health visiting qualifications, I became fearful of the longevity of my career in health visiting, as the Government announced severe cuts and changes within that service (a decision that has since been reversed with a large recruitment campaign). Through serendipity and due to transferable skills, I was offered a role as an OH nurse in an NHS foundation trust. The NHS sponsored my initial training and I consolidated my learning within the NHS. As I considered it might be difficult to gain a senior managerial role without diverse experience, I left the security of my NHS role to work in manufacturing within the private sector and higher education. I then completed further studies for an MSc in Occupational Health and Management. More recently, I am combining setting up my own practice with contract work.

OH is not necessarily the easy option as viewed by many of my colleagues, and there is confusion around the role of OH; even my health professional colleagues confuse occupational therapy and OH, such remains the lack of awareness. The role requires diverse knowledge and the ability to assist both the employee and the employer, which can sometimes be a difficult balance with conflicting interests, or put another way, there are two sides to every story. The boundaries between advising and treating require skilful management.

As reflected in all areas of medicine, case management is often complex involving personal, home-related and work-related issues. No two days are ever the same. The role is most rewarding and there is no shortage of work in this growing industry.

Career vignettes

Lorna Owens

Occupational Health Physiotherapist

I started working in the field of occupational health in January 2017, after working in the NHS in Knowsley, Merseyside for 5 years. The varied workload and new environments I work in have provided me with some great new challenges.

It's been great to adapt my skills to managing an occupational caseload, getting out into the workplace and making my assessments and rehabilitation more functional and work focused. I've also found it beneficial to be able to link regularly with the managers at the different companies and other members of the OH team. Having this open dialogue really helps support people at work; it's definitely a rewarding part of my role and I see this reflected in the employee outcomes.

Within a short period of time I quickly saw the benefit of OH physiotherapy for people at work. We can get expert, early advice to employees to prevent problems and support wider health and wellbeing, not just musculoskeletal issues.

The other aspect of my role that I've really enjoyed is the prevention aspect. Within a relatively short period of time, I was involved in workplace assessments, training managers and supporting different health and wellbeing campaigns. This is effectively about preventing problems in the first place, something I think we all know that physios are very well placed to do.

Sally Beardsmore

Occupational Health Technician, HomeServe

I started working part-time as an administrator after studying midwifery at university. After 18 months in the role, I moved to work full-time for the Group Safety Director as a health & safety support officer.

After two years in the role, I moved to work as a health trainer and offered mini 'know your numbers' health checks to all our UK staff. The role expanded and I began to offer more than just health checks as I trained with the NHS as a stop smoking advisor. HomeServe brought occupational health in-house and I moved to work as an OH technician in September 2017. I've recently passed the audiometry and spirometry exams and will be studying for the NEBOSH later this year.



Qualifications needed to become an OH professional

Doctors

Medical practitioners who have an interest in occupational medicine might wish to complete a Diploma in Occupational Medicine. This is designed for doctors who are working part-time in, or have an interest in, occupational medicine. It is most frequently taken by general practitioners who often add to their practice portfolio by providing OH services to local companies. There are a number of providers of this Diploma, from East Kent University Hospital Foundation Trust, to the Royal Society of Public Health, and Birmingham University.

To qualify as a specialist in occupational medicine doctors need to register with the Faculty of Occupational Medicine (FOM) and undertake a speciality training programme approved by the General Medical Council (GMC). Once successfully completed, this makes doctors eligible both for Membership of the Faculty (MFOM) and for entry to the GMC Specialist Register (AFOM or FFOM). The Society and Faculty of Occupational Medicine have produced a document outlining the benefits to an organisation of hosting a trainee. An alternative route to becoming a specialist is through a Certificate of Eligibility for Specialist Registration (CESR) application to the GMC. Doctors who have applied successfully through CESR to join the GMC Specialist Register may then apply for Membership of the Faculty of Occupational Medicine. The Society of Occupational Medicine has a support group for people going through this process. The mean average salary for OH doctors was over £120,000 in 2016.

OH Nurses

OH nurses are probably the biggest professional group in the speciality. Registered nurses (NHS band 5) may gain employment as an occupational health nurse without any further training. Within these roles the work and promotion are likely to be limited.

It is possible to undertake training whilst employed, either through the Specialist Community Public Health Nursing (SCPHN), BA, BSc, PGDip or MSc route.

These courses take one year full-time, or two years part-time. Some employers do not require this and focus on "on the job" training. Educational requirements and the OH nurse career paths are currently under review by the National School of Occupational Health (NSOH) and the Faculty of Occupational Health Nursing (FOHN). Average salaries for OH nurses were in the region of £33,000 - £35,000 with managerial roles earning on average £45,000 in 2018.

OH Physiotherapists

OH physiotherapists provide treatment and rehabilitation of work-relevant injuries (which can be provided on-site or in an off-site treatment centre), plan return to work, educate about injury prevention in the workplace, carry out health promotion, job task analysis and advise on modifications to the role or working environment. They often have specialist knowledge of manual handling and physical ergonomics in the workplace. Average salaries are in the region of £32,000.

Occupational Health Psychologists

Occupational health psychology is the application of the science of psychology to work. Occupational health psychologists use psychological theories and approaches to deliver tangible benefits by enhancing the effectiveness of organisations and developing the performance, motivation and wellbeing of people in the workplace. Occupational psychologists develop, apply and evaluate a range of tools and interventions across many different areas of the workplace, including:

- **Psychological assessment**
- **Learning, training and development**
- **Wellbeing at work**
- **Work design, organisational change and development**
- **Leadership, motivation and engagement**

Average salaries for experienced practitioners are around £35,000.

Occupational Health Technicians

OH technicians work as part of a team. They undertake health surveillance clinics including spirometry, audiology and vision screening. The OH nurse or physician remain accountable for interpreting these results and determining fitness to work. The role may expand to involve blood pressure monitoring, phlebotomy, cholesterol and urine testing. This role involves working on their own initiative and may include site visits. The OH technician has to provide accurate written, electronic and verbal reports observing confidentiality at all times. Average salaries for OH technicians are around £22,000.

Management referrals / case management

Within the workplace the workers are considered to be a healthy population rather than 'sick patients'. Appropriate use of verbal and written language in consultations and reports is key to encourage worker self-confidence and early return to work.

Management referrals vary in complexity. Advising office-based workers who are ready to return to work may be routine following a fracture from a fall, a routine operation or a heart attack if their recovery has been uncomplicated. Advising on return to work following a stroke, asthma attack, seizure, chronic back problem or upper limb disorder requires good communication skills.

The OH practitioner needs the worker to paint a clear picture of their day to day reality and remaining symptoms, limitations, concerns or barriers to completing substantive job role tasks. Robust understanding of the risk assessment process will help identify any workplace potential aggravating factors that to mitigate may require work restrictions in the short, medium or longer-term.

A challenge for the developing OH practitioner is finding ways to approach often painful or emotion-inducing



topics to gain information and provide suitable sign-posting advice to the employee in a timely manner. Sharing simple breathing techniques or seated stretching exercises can assist an individual to feel more in control by helping to reduce the effects of stress hormones within the body.

The practitioner not only has to consider the wellbeing of the worker but also risk to colleagues, product safety or third parties.

A key skill therefore is learning how to provide risk-based advice to management to include and protect any end clients e.g. students or vulnerable adults and children who may be affected by the reduced health status of an employee. Indeed, some unwell workers find themselves being classed as a 'vulnerable person' themselves.

Alternatively, even where a worker may be able to return, their workplace or role may present risks which are foreseeable. An example is a nurse in a secure unit

who sustained a serious injury which will never fully recover and who may be required to physically intervene in the future to protect self or others.

The OH role is not always about keeping people in work. Sometimes there is a place for open and frank conversations when workers are not fit to return to aspects of a particular role or environment, permanently or for the foreseeable future. So, for those chronically ill, incapable of fulfilling their contractual requirements, towards the end of their life or where there are barriers to returning, helping facilitate an exit from a particular role or the workplace can be a win-win situation for all concerned.

Supporting employers to follow capability proceedings and redeploy or dismiss / retire a worker on grounds of ill-health capability can add value. Humans are naturally resilient and following a period of grieving for their last role with a suggested focus on increasing self-confidence workers are often able to move on. They have transferable skills suitable for other roles or organisations. Although an upsetting situation at the time, employees often express gratitude for the support provided by OH at a later date.

Where to study?

Multidisciplinary

University of Birmingham

Occupational Health

<https://tinyurl.com/y9k4dv5h>

This programme is applicable for doctors, nurses, scientists, economists and physiotherapists.

1 year FT or 2 years PT

PG Cert | PGDip | MSc

Cardiff University

Occupational Health Policy and Practice

<https://tinyurl.com/ya97suuh>

This programme is suitable for physicians, nurses, environmental health officers, human resource professionals, trade union representatives, health and safety inspectors, managers, civil servants, scientists and others who have responsibility for the health and safety of employees.

3 years distance learning - MSc

Middlesex University

Occupational Health and Safety

<https://tinyurl.com/y8833ecj>

The course is accredited by the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health, which means you can become a graduate member of the institution when you complete the course and can then gain chartered membership after two years' professional development.

1 year FT | 2 years PT

MSc

University of Nottingham

Workplace Health and Wellbeing

<https://tinyurl.com/y8nf63tf>

Professional experience in a relevant field is required. This may include, among others, occupational health, wellbeing, safety, nursing, physiotherapy, occupational therapy and human resources.

1 year - PG Cert

1.5 years - PG Dip

2 years - MSc

4-6 years - DocWHW

Loughborough University

Occupational Health and Safety Management

<https://tinyurl.com/yca4883m>

The programme is aimed at professional health and safety advisors and managerial, engineering and scientific staff with responsibilities for occupational health and safety.

Direct Entry MSc for those with prior exemptions

<https://tinyurl.com/yb4g8azw>

Loughborough University recognise a range of other Diplomas as an entry route onto the MSc and may take into account your prior learning to see if you meet the requirements of the MSc.

7 months PT - PG Cert

14 months PT - PG Dip

26 months PT - MSc

18 months PT - MSc

London South Bank University (LSBU)

Workplace Health Management

<https://tinyurl.com/y9ejgne4>

1 year FT - BSc (Hons)

2 years PT - PG Dip

Cardiff Metropolitan

Occupational Safety, Health & Wellbeing

<https://tinyurl.com/yd63k2sr>

1 year FT or up to 3 years PT

PG Cert / PG Dip / MSc

University of Cork

Occupational Health

<https://tinyurl.com/ycnzuyuhu>

18 months or 2 years

MSc (Campus or online)

Where to study?

OH Psychologists

Find an accredited course at:

<https://tinyurl.com/ycnm5tnh>

Examples of advanced courses include:

King's College London

<https://tinyurl.com/ybuka46z>

MSc

University of Nottingham

<https://tinyurl.com/y8xynexl>

PhD

Birkbeck, University of London

<https://tinyurl.com/ybx3arzu>

PhD

OH Physiotherapists

Varied providers e.g.

<http://www.acpohe.org.uk/events>

<https://www.fitback.co.uk/services/training-courses/>

Varied short courses

OH Technicians

Short courses available e.g.
from Network Medical LLP

<https://tinyurl.com/ybzd395o>



Where to study?

Doctors

University of Birmingham

<https://tinyurl.com/y954rdav>

The principal aim of this course is to prepare medical practitioners for the Faculty of Occupational Medicine (FOM) Diploma in Occupational Medicine examination, which is a qualification for those wishing to practice occupational medicine as a generalist. For full details of the diploma examination regulations please refer to the FOM website.

A secondary aim of the course is to prepare delegates for their initial provision of occupational medicine services. Therefore, the course is suitable for general practitioners undertaking occupational health sessions and doctors in other branches of medicine who would like to learn more about occupational medicine.

2 weeks - Dip Occ Med

Manchester University

<https://tinyurl.com/yaqyqt9u>

for the Faculty of Occupational Medicine (FOM) Diploma in Occupational Medicine (DOccMed) examination.

Although the CPD Diploma does not result in an academic qualification from the University, students who have completed the course are eligible for 10 CPD points towards their re-validation. In addition, you have the option to transfer your credits and continue on to its postgraduate courses for a postgraduate certificate (PGCert), Advanced Diploma (Adv Dip) or Master of Science (MSc) award.

6 months - CPD Diploma

1 year PT - PG Cert

2 years PT - PG Dip

3 years PT - MSc

Royal Society of Public Health

<https://tinyurl.com/y7fcrklt>

RSPH is approved by the Faculty of Occupational Medicine (FOM) to run the course to prepare candidates for the Diploma in Occupational Medicine written examination and the oral examination based on a portfolio.

2 weeks - Dip Occ Med

Training – www.fom.ac.uk/education/speciality-training/prospective-trainees

The CESR route – www.fom.ac.uk/education/cesr

Diplomas – www.fom.ac.uk/education/examinations/diplomas/doccmcd

Where to study?

Nurses

University of Chester

<https://tinyurl.com/y8e8ctvt>

1 year FT or 2 years PT - BSc Hons (SCPHN)

1 year FT - BSc or Graduate Diploma

Derby University

<https://tinyurl.com/ld6t84u>

1 year FT or 2 years PT - BSc Hons (SCPHN)

Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen

<https://tinyurl.com/y9uaky2r>

2 year distance learning course leading to a BSc in occupational health

Brunel University, London

<https://tinyurl.com/ybnoo79y>

1 year FT or 2 years PT - BSc (SCPHN)

Teeside University

<https://tinyurl.com/ybppyj8a>

1 year FT or 2 years PT - PG Dip (SCPHN)

University of Cumbria

<https://tinyurl.com/y98fwr44>

1-2 years PT or 2-4 years PT

BSc (Hons) (Top out)

University Advanced Diploma Practice Development

Non NMC

University of West of England

<https://tinyurl.com/ya7qwj6v>

1 year FT or 2 years PT - PG Dip (SCPHN)

University of West of Scotland

<https://tinyurl.com/y9855csx>

2 years PT or distance learning - Graduate Diploma



FAQs

Funding?

An employer might pay for this. In light of the current educational climate, financial support for students might be subject to change, therefore the links provided below should deliver the most up to date information:

www.gov.uk/apply-for-student-finance

For information on how to apply for student finance support in all four countries, see Department of Health:

www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-of-health

There are a number of scholarships such as the Florence Nightingale Scholarship

www.florence-nightingale-foundation.org.uk/content/page/33/

There may also be a limited number of training posts available for nurses and doctors.

Where can I source a Practice Teacher?

Ask senior colleagues and also ask if they would be willing to consider studying the Practice Teacher (PT) course (the University of Western Scotland and London South Bank University can offer support to new PTs).

Return to study?

Programmes welcome applications from career changers. The individual universities will advise on how to prepare for study. Visit the university websites for more information.



Who are we?

The Society of Occupational Medicine (SOM) is the largest and oldest national professional organisation of individuals with an interest in occupational health. SOM membership is for anyone working in and with an interest in occupational health. SOM membership demonstrates a commitment to improving health at work, supports professional development and enhances future employability enhancing our members' reputation and employability.

Members are part of a multidisciplinary community – including doctors, technicians, nurses, health specialists and other professionals – with access to the information, expertise and learning needed to keep at the forefront of their role. Our members benefit from career development opportunities alongside practical, day-to-day support and guidance, through local and national networks that are open to all. Through its collective voice, SOM advances knowledge, raises standards and increases awareness and seeks to positively influence the future of OH.

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Nick Pahl, CEO of the SOM, introducing a mental health in the workplace day at Aviva, held with the British Psychological Society Division of Occupational Psychology in October 2017.