

Textbook of Occupational Medicine Practice (2nd edition)

edited by D Koh, K S Chia and J Jeyaratnam

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Having ‘grown-up’ on occupational medicine practice textbooks traditionally written by European and American counterparts, I was pleasantly surprised to pick up a new book that has been edited and published locally, with strong contributions from largely local occupational health professionals and clinical medical specialists—a number of whom have been accorded international recognition, no less. Among those foreign contributors who have lent their “brand name” include Phoon Wai-On, J M Harrington and Aw Tar Ching.

As a practising doctor and an ex-medical student, I am of the opinion that a “good” medical textbook should be able to merge the following two elements effectively. Firstly, it must have adequate, accurate and accessible medical information to become a useful reference whenever queries arise during clinical practice. Secondly, it must provide a clinical approach for the physician for which he is familiar with. The book should follow from the clinical presentation, making the diagnosis, understanding the methods of investigation, modalities of treatment and the scope of follow-up management.

In addition, the occupational medicine text has to incorporate guidelines on the diagnosis and the prevention of occupational disease. These include issues covering fitness to work assessments, role of medical surveillance, a description of relevant legislative requirements, disability assessments as well as occupational health ethics, as the company physician who has to weigh his responsibilities to the worker (patient) and to his employer.

The “Textbook of Occupational Medicine Practice” has aligned itself along the same spirit. It begins with an introduction to the relationship between work and health, the concept of “Occupational Diseases” and “Work-related Diseases”. The subsequent chapters are presented according to organ systems. The added value comes from the joint authorship between the clinicians and the occupational health counterparts.

The issues of occupational diseases are addressed in a manner that a practitioner is likely to encounter it. For instance, when a practitioner diagnoses a worker to have dermatitis, he will need to consider the relationship of this condition to his work. Common workplace exposures, various occupational types and features which tend to suggest work-relatedness are explained. Treatment and understanding how to protect the worker by removing him from the workplace exposure, and workplace preventive measures to protect other workers are also discussed.

I particularly like the way chapters have been presented according to standard headings, such that important aspects are not inadvertently omitted. The generous use of case studies place factual contexts into actual situations, helping to facilitate learning and application.

There are but only a few areas that may be improved. And these are merely minor points. I would have liked a little bit more on how the management of the individual worker fits into the overall workplace occupational health programme at the beginning, to set the stage for the rest of the chapters. While it is difficult to cover all occupational diseases, there are areas for which the practitioner may face in this modern day and age that could be included or expanded further, such as electromagnetic radiation, indoor air quality and workplace health promotion programmes.

Occupational medicine practice in Singapore is a medical specialty that is often overshadowed by the mainstream clinical specialties. However, it is becoming apparent that the concept of “preventive” medicine is progressively gaining importance as the rapid rise of modern clinical medicine slows.

The publication of such a text certainly marks as a significant milestone of how occupational health practice has advanced in Singapore. As a textbook, it stands well on its own among the cornucopia of European and American publications. For instance, it is included in the recommended list of occupational medicine texts compiled by the American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, and is also used in several other countries including Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia, Hong Kong and Jordan. I highly recommend it for medical students and practitioners.

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