

# Occupational and Environmental Medicine: A Discipline to Pursue in this Millennium

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As the world is moving towards industrialization, there is an increasing awareness of environmental influences on the health and safety of workers, and in communities near industrial establishments. The Philippines in its endeavor to become a newly industrialized country, is increasingly confronted with problems regarding health and safety of workers, and with the environmental health impact of industrialization on nearby communities.

## Magnitude of the Problem of Occupational Diseases and Injuries

According to International Labour Organization (ILO) in 2005, the number of job-related accidents and illnesses, which annually claim more than two million lives, appears to be rising because of rapid industrialization in some developing countries.<sup>1</sup> In its latest estimates, the ILO found that in addition to job-related deaths, each year there are some 268 million non-fatal workplace accidents in which the victims miss at least three days of work as a result, as well as 160 million new cases of work-related illness. The ILO has previously estimated that workplace accidents and illness are responsible for the loss of some four per cent of the world's GDP in compensation and absence from work.

In 2009, local statistics showed that occupational diseases reached 71,894 cases. Most common diseases identified were musculoskeletal disorders and occupational dermatitis. Occupational injuries reached 39,587 cases.<sup>2</sup>

## Need for a Post-residency Training Program in Occupational and Environmental Medicine (OEM) at University of the Philippines (UP) Manila

At present, UP-Philippine General Hospital (UP-PGH) has no fellowship training program in OEM. Since 1976, the Department of Environmental and Occupational Health, UP College of Public Health (UP-CPH) has been offering the Master of Occupational Health (MOH) degree program which provides competencies for the trainees to become an effective Occupational Health manager and researcher. However, to be able to produce experts in the field of OEM, a clinical training component is essential together with the MOH degree.

## A Study on the Need for OEM

A research project funded by UP-National Institutes of Health (UP-NIH) entitled "A Study on the Demand for a UP Manila Training Program in Occupational and Environmental Medicine" was conducted among potential trainees and stakeholders in 2009-2010.<sup>3</sup> Results of the study confirmed the perceptions of various stakeholders on the importance and relevance of OEM in our country, and validated perceptions on the demand for trained OEM practitioners capable of providing comprehensive health care for workers and communities at risk of developing work and environment-related health problems.

Survey results also showed that a considerable number, 52.6-73.8% of the 542 potential trainees from various groups, were willing to undergo specialty training in OEM. Approximately one-third (33.2%) of the respondents preferred a 2-year post-residency OEM training program.

## Current Initiatives for OEM at UP Manila

Rapid industrialization, urbanization, environmental degradation, disasters (natural and man-made), and newly emerging diseases affecting the working population and communities—these are growing problems in our country today, which have to be addressed by policy-makers in government as well as by administrators of training institutions like University of the Philippines (UP) Manila.

Presently, a dual-track fellowship program in OEM is being proposed at UP Manila, to enable the medical practitioner to meet the unlimited challenges of diagnostic and therapeutic dilemmas resulting from diseases and/or injuries with underlying work or environment-related problems. This program shall provide competencies for the trainees as a manager, researcher and clinician in the field of Occupational and Environmental Medicine. Once approved and institutionalized, the proposed fellowship training in OEM shall hopefully pave the way for the realization of the vision of "a community of OEM experts to meet the challenges of this millennium".

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