



# TWO WEEKS IN OCCUPATIONAL MEDICINE

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Group 1  
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My name is Luyanda Ngongoma and I am a final year medical student, a mere few weeks away from graduating from the University of Cape Town (UCT).

## Background

At the beginning of 2018 I decided to hold myself accountable for my professional goals and aspirations by signing up for a mentorship program led by Mr James Irlam. The program pairs medical students with a mentor in a discipline of their interest. Uninspired with most of the specialties I've encountered over the course of my medical journey, I chose to look into public health and was assigned Dr Itumeleng Ntata-

mala a registrar in occupational medicine (a division of UCT's School of Public Health).

Having done my month long elective at one of KZN's busiest emergency centres (in a last minute attempt to up-skill myself prior to internship), I opted to use my two week elective to explore something I might enjoy. Thus, with a mentor in occupational medicine and the co-incident launch of the occupational medicine elective program this year, I soon found myself at Groote Schuur's (GSH) J floor OPD embarking on a two week action-packed crash course in occupational health.



## Debunking Myths and Misconceptions

Aside from brief exposure to the discipline in my pre-clinical years and in conversation with Dr Itumeleng, I knew very little about occupational medicine. Some of my misconceptions prior to the program were that:

- Occupational health is only about the injuries and illnesses acquired during the period of employment or as a result of a workplace hazard.
- An occupational medicine specialist was somewhat of a company general practitioner
- Occupational health and safety was a luxury in the workplace.

After an incredibly informative two weeks I've come to appreciate:

- That occupational health deals with work-related diseases holistically i.e.:
  - The discipline helps identify diseases and disorders acquired prior to, during and occasionally after employment that may impede the client's quality of life and/or ability to function optimally in the workplace.
  - The occupational health team's role in the re-integration of the client (following illness) back into the workplace
  - That the occupational health and safety team (through formal research and regular inspection) advises the employer on hazards and risks within the workplace and helps institute health promotion, education and prevention measures to protect the client and the employer.

- That occupational health and safety measures are both a necessity and legal requirement in the workplace
- The branches of occupational health including:
  - Occupational medicine
  - Employee wellness and the human resources department
  - Safety, hygiene and environmental health e.g. hygienists, engineers, safety experts etc

## Reflections on my Experience

After first perusal of the timetable, I admittedly felt both overwhelmed and excited. It was a jam-packed schedule that kept me present, constantly interacting with my external environment and contemporaneously consolidating new information with my daily experiences. It seemed like every day I was either discovering a new department at GSH or trawling Cape Town's CBD to learn more about the different divisions of occupational health. I also gained valuable insight on various divisions such as: infection prevention control; occupational therapy and work assessments; provincial vs. city of Cape Town government and ICAS. Staff at both the occupational health clinic and the satellite sites I visited were very welcoming and scheduled discussions and mini-lectures felt very organic, e.g. starting the first week off with basics like history and examination, understanding hazards and risks etc.

I particularly enjoyed that every member of staff I encountered had a different and valuable perspective on the discipline to share. Dr Ntamatama

helped guide me through the elective program and discipline as a whole, always sharing pearls of wisdom from his own experiences. Dr Van de water gave me a balanced overview of the specialist program. We had interesting discussions about the practitioner vs. specialist roles in South Africa and the realities of the job market. The women practitioners and specialists I encountered (Dr's Faruk, Sonday, Mokhobo and Burdzik) offered insight on topics such as work-life-home balance and other challenges unique to women in the discipline. Moreover, it was particularly encouraging to shadow women of colour in the profession. Representation truly does matter.

## Highlights

Some of the activities I revelled in included:

- The health risk assessment with Sister Chetty
- The consultations I sat in on with Dr Sonday that dealt with a needle stick injuries. These became opportunities for personal health promotion and prevention, as they improved my own knowledge on the protocol following such injuries – very relevant going into internship.
- My day spent at provincial government with Dr Van de water exposed me to the exciting realm of policy creation and management. I must also admit, sitting in on meetings was really cool.

- During my time at the City of Cape Town with Dr Mokhobo, I got to observe workers being screened for noise-induced hearing loss. Additionally the team was such a delight!

## My Recommendations

Making a bank of lectures and resources (including those from 4<sup>th</sup> year and the different divisions of occupational health) and making it available to the student prior to elective's commencement would be really helpful. I think it would make orientation to the discipline quicker and easier. Although elective offered insight on occupational health in the hospital and government setting, I would have really enjoyed a peek into the discipline within the industrial setting e.g. observing a health risk assessment at a large factory or production facility.

## Tips for Future Medical Students

If you're interested in a versatile profession that has clinical, research and policy-making elements, sign up for this elective program!

## Acknowledgments

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The registrars and practitioners who guided me through the elective.