

A Proposed Two-Track Fellowship Training in Occupational and Environmental Medicine

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The new millennium, characterized by rapid industrialization, urbanization, environmental degradation, natural and man-made disasters, and newly emerging diseases affecting the working population and communities, is full of challenges which have to be addressed by policy makers of concerned government and non-government institutions. As of the present however, no formal specialty training program in Occupational and Environmental Medicine is being offered by any institution here in the Philippines.

Occupational and Environmental Medicine: Scope and Relevance

Occupational and Environmental Medicine (OEM) is perhaps the most comprehensive of all medical specialties. It is devoted to the prevention and management of occupational and environmental injury, illness and disability; as well as the promotion of health and productivity of workers, their families and communities.

OEM is a discipline to pursue especially in a developing country like the Philippines, wherein a considerable number of workers and their families reside in agricultural and mining communities, and are therefore exposed to various occupational and environmental hazards. This discipline offers unlimited challenges for the modern physician who is confronted with diagnostic and therapeutic dilemmas resulting from diseases and/or injuries with underlying work or environment related problems. As an example, there is cause for concern if Silicotuberculosis is managed

as a mere case of Multiple Drug Resistant TB due to failure in identifying the underlying Silicosis which is an occupational disease. Similarly, results of epidemiologic studies in mining communities in the Philippines revealed that underlying Heavy Metal Poisoning could be a risk factor for developing Drug Resistant Malaria. These are but a few instances that can indeed put to a test the expertise of any medical practitioner.^{1,2,3,4}

Initiatives for a Residency Training Program in Occupational Medicine at UP Manila

Attempts to conduct a residency training in Occupational Medicine started on April 30, 1979 when the Philippine Occupational and Industrial Medicine Association (POIMA) made a proposal to the Dean of UP Institute of Public Health (UP-IPH) for a joint project to facilitate the offering of a formal residency training in Occupational Medicine. This request was reiterated in March, 1980 and in June, 1986 when POIMA proposed that their resident physician trainees be allowed to take the regular course schedule of the Master of Occupational Health (MOH) degree or take special classes in the evenings and on Saturdays at UP-IPH. The proposed joint project between UP-IPH and POIMA did not materialize however, due to various constraints. In the early years of the 1990s, representatives of the Philippine College of Occupational Medicine (formerly POIMA) consulted the Office of the Director of the UP-Philippine General Hospital regarding the possibility of accommodating resident physician trainees in Occupational Medicine. They were informed however, that the proposal was not feasible at that time due to administrative and budgetary constraints.

Initiatives for a Fellowship Training Program in Occupational & Environmental Medicine (OEM) at UP Manila

In 1998, the Department of Environmental and Occupational Health (DEOH), UP College of Public Health and the Department of Physiology, UP College of Medicine started a collaboration for the development of a training program in OEM in order to pursue plans to maximize utilization of resources and facilities of the DEOH Clinic

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located at UP College of Public Health, and that of the Center for the Enhancement of Human Performance located at the Department of Physiology, UP College of Medicine.

In that same year, the original proponents of the proposed training program in OEM organized themselves to form an OEM Core Working Group. The motivating force that inspired the OEM Core Working Group to draft a training program in OEM was their common vision of *“A community of OEM specialists to meet the challenges of the new millennium”*. The mission statement formulated by the group was *“To produce experts in Occupational and Environmental Medicine capable of planning, implementing and evaluating programs in occupational and environmental health and safety; clinically competent to diagnose and manage work and environment related diseases and injuries; empowered to promote health and prevent diseases/injuries in the workplace and in the community.”*

The Core Working Group envisioned a training program for OEM specialists with competencies that are comparable with counterparts from the USA and other countries. To achieve this vision, a two-track post-residency training program was formulated specifically for the pioneering group of trainees who will be future consultants in the OEM Clinic that was also proposed to be established at the UP – Philippine General Hospital (UP-PGH).

In February, 1999 the OEM Core Working Group started a series of consultation with various stakeholders representing some government regulatory agencies such as the Department of Health, the Department of Labor and Employment, the Employees’ Compensation Commission as well as with representatives of concerned professional organizations.

On July 19, 2001 the proposed Two-Track Post-Residency Fellowship Training Program in OEM was presented for the first time to the UP College of Medicine - UP PGH Training Coordination Committee (TCC). The training program presented was a sub-specialty training in OEM to be offered to those who have completed formal residency training in Family and Community Medicine, Internal Medicine or other relevant clinical specialties.

The proposed OEM fellowship program covers two years of training. In the first year, graduate courses leading to a Master of Occupational Health (MOH) degree at the Department of Environmental and Occupational Health, UP College of Public Health are required. The UP-CPH is the premier school of Public Health in the Philippines with a competent faculty who provides excellent training in Occupational and Environmental Health Sciences, Health Behavior and Health Education, Biostatistics and other disciplines. Trainees shall attend the regular daytime MOH classes for one year. However, an option to enroll in the two year (flexitime) MOH course conducted in the evening, is also available.

The second year OEM fellowship training focuses on a supervised practicum composed of clinical, managerial and research activities. Trainees shall have substantive corporate medicine experience in local industry with completion of a major preventive health project. Trainees will be involved in hands-on learning opportunities to further enhance the knowledge and skills developed after obtaining the MOH degree.

On February 11, 2009 UP Manila Chancellor Ramon L. Arcadio approved for funding the research project entitled *“A Study on the Demand for a UP Manila Training Program in Occupational and Environmental Medicine”*. This study was conducted in response to the recommendation of the TCC to present hard data on the training needs of potential trainees.

On August 26, 2010, another consultative meeting was conducted among various stakeholders after dissemination of the highly favorable results of the aforementioned study. The meeting was attended by representatives from the Offices of the Dean, UP-CPH and UP College of Medicine; the Office of the Director, UP-PGH; and the Offices of the Chair of three(3) UP-PGH clinical departments (Department of Family and Community Medicine, Department of Internal Medicine and Department of Emergency Medicine Services). Representatives from concerned government institutions/agencies such as the Department of Health, the Occupational Health and Safety Center, the Employees Compensation Commission, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources, as well as representatives of relevant professional organizations (Philippine Academy of Family Physicians, Philippine College of Occupational Medicine) also participated in this meeting. Suggestions to improve the proposed OEM fellowship training program were made by the participants during the meeting and the Department of Family and Community Medicine, UP-PGH, was acknowledged as the department to take charge in the implementation of the OEM clinical fellowship rotations.

As agreed upon during the August, 2010 meeting among various stakeholders, the modified version of the proposed Two-Track Post-Residency Fellowship Training Program in OEM shall have been finished for possible review by the group in November, 2010. By December 2010, approval by the TCC can hopefully be obtained to facilitate presentation to the University Council of UP Manila.

The institution of a new fellowship training program in OEM at UP Manila requires a lot of patience and dedication on the part of the proponents. Therefore, initiatives made since 1998 should be supported, improved and sustained by the stakeholders.

According to the Mission Statement,⁵ UP Manila shall provide the highest quality of advanced instruction, professional training, basic and applied research and community service; thereby producing outstanding scholars, practitioners, and leaders in the fields of health, the natural

sciences, and the humanities. To achieve the goal of becoming an outstanding and relevant academic institution, UP Manila should therefore respond to calls from various sectors, and pioneer the establishment of a specialty training program in Occupational and Environmental Medicine in the Philippines.

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