

ACADEMIC FORUM FOR OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH & MEDICINE

Notes of a meeting held on Monday 25th June, 2018 at the Regent's University, London.

Present: Professor Ewan Macdonald (EMD), Dr Nikki Cordell (NC)

Professor Martie Van Tongeren (MVT) Dr Sara De Matteis (SDE) Professor David Snashall (DS)
Professor Karen Walker-Bone (KWB) Jackie Douglas (JD) Sharon Stevelink (SS) Dr Neil Greenberg
(NG) Professor Diana Kloss (DK) Nick Pahl (NP) Pam Keshavarzian (PK)

Dialled in: Dr Sotiris.Vardoulakis (SV) Professor Ralph Fevre (RF) Dr Joanna Yarker (JY) Dr
Karen Walker-Bone (KWB)

Apologies: Professor Damien McElvenny

1. Introduction

EM welcomed the group expressed the importance of having a lively, healthy occupational health research group that works across the UK. NP stated that SOM values research and does all it can to support it through its scientific conference, funding etc. to encourage further research in the field.

EWD explained that the Academic Forum is independent but relies on admin support, which SOM has agreed to provide. He gave an overview history of the forum and the importance of continuing it. He expressed that there has been a concerning decline in traditional OH and OM teaching and courses, primarily in Chairs of OH and OM. In contrast there has been a growth in disease specific areas, such as veteran's mental health at work, MSK research in relation to work, research into the quality of work and unemployment, etc.

There has also been a general reduction in professionals that early researchers could refer to. These are challenges that need to be addressed. He suggested this decline extends to the rest of Europe.

2. Discussion

NG expressed that, from the occupational mental health viewpoint, (in particular in veteran's mental health) there seems to be great deal of research already in place but they are small scale and providing limited answers. The challenge is to find high quality research in this case (police data has helped). What needs to be addressed is quality rather than quantity and sustainable funding to retain researchers

JD from the Colt Foundation explained that their foundation funded meetings on the future of occupational health in the UK. What became evident was that occupational health research departments are on the decline following the retirement of senior academicians and this remains a concern. It seems that there is less appetite for people remaining in the discipline and they tend to move to other sectors. There is so much more that can be done. Colt Foundation funds PHD studentship, being aware that is vital to bring young researchers and scientist into the field and they have been reasonably successful in this endeavour. More support is needed.

MVT explained that in his view training/teaching and research are too far apart. Teaching is mainly focused on the practitioner and research involves a much wider area Therefore, Universities are also less interested in academic occupational medicine and health as it doesn't necessarily produce scientific papers that will have high impact. The concern is that teaching and research are not as interlinked as they should be and the research will end up in perhaps other departments than the

occupational health. Hopefully this may change with the increase interest in areas of mental health, etc. What needs to be done is to reach out and get teams engaged in occupational health and medicine.

NC explained that she is involved with teams in vocational rehabilitation and there has been a growing interest in this area (she is doing her PHD). It was recognised that there is a gap between vocational rehab and work/occupation. There are possibilities of engaging those who research rehab and gaining knowledge of underlying chronic conditions and its biology to add that aspect to the context of work. This will certainly encourage possible funding. She believes that the challenge is to encourage people and get them interested in this field and in her experience.

NP suggested that we could work on a document about *the value of occupational health research*. This could be targeted towards funding organisations, policymakers and others. SOM and FOM is collaborating with the work and health unit who work on evidence informed policy making. The government has an agenda in area and we can help them with this. NP commented that there is significant research in North America and UK in this field, evidenced by the publications in the journal. NP also updated those present that Dr John Hobson is standing down as the editor of the journal and he encouraged those who are interested to apply to the role.

DK explained that in her view there are many occupation health research that are not necessarily performed in the occupational health departments and therefore a question remains about the validity of their work and research.

DS explained that it's important to also focus on practical/operational research and this heavily relies on big funders. There are not many commercial organisations that are willing to fund occupational health/medicine research. DS pointed out that he was involved in reviving the academic forum back in the 80s and early 90s when he was the president of the FOM. The biggest issue still will be to find funders as there are many capable researchers but the discouraging issue is the lack of funding and this need to be addressed.

SDM explained that although currently her work is funded by NIHR but after this period, no funding is available for her to remain. So, not having the means to retain her to train the next generation of researchers will pose an issue. If the funds are only driven by the pharmaceutical industry who will be interested in economic return rather than prevention, then this will limit the research scope. The big issue remains funding. SDM notified the forum that DM had suggested to start a UK & Ireland Occupational and Environmental Epidemiology Society with the aim of networking with the experts and bringing the scientific teams in this field together. SDM to chair with DM as the secretary. This is free and invites those interested to join. The first meeting of the society will be held in Edinburgh on the 1st of April 2019.

SV outlined the work of IOM on environmental aspect of OH and retaining their presence in the field and in particular their work in epidemiology.

RF advised that, in his experience, more disciplines are interested in occupational health research but that co-location will be helpful. There are localities with more involvement in research than the others and integration with different geographical locations is needed.

JY advised what is most needed is more collaboration between academic groups and practicing occupational physicians. Partnership between the academics and the trainees is vital to provide the support that is needed in producing quality, publishable work. DK mentioned that it's promising to see

the calibre of the trainees has improved compared to the past. What is needed is a forum where trainees and others can get together, collaborate and seek support and perhaps FOM/SOM can facilitate this.

3. Conclusion and Action Points

A concluding discussion occurred about:

- Dame Carol Black's view, calling for a *national centre / virtual centre* to collect the best advice and a trusted source of information for occupational health.
- *Identifying research priorities* remain vital. Research priorities has changed over time and has progressed more towards evidence based research.
- Linking with *Occupational Hygiene and psychology and occupational therapy* disciplines. It is also important to *engage more nurses with academic research*.

Action

- 1 SOM to host a one day autumn meeting of the Academic Forum with:
 - Researchers that would like to present short papers/work in progress
 - Networking opportunities for academic trainees so they can come together and seek support with more senior academics
- 2 Create a list of researchers and their specialities
- 3 Grow the forum:
 - All invite a wider audience interested in academic research in work and health to join the forum
 - SOM to provide information about the forum on the SOM website and social media platforms.
- 4 Facilitate funding:
 - JD to discuss with the team at Colt to see if any funding can be provided for PHD or Post Doc research or else.
 - Forum to explore the possibility of funding a PHD
 - Funding opportunities to be circulated
- 5 Policy links - SOM to update the work and health unit with information about the academic forum's activity and purpose.
- 6 SDM to share information about the UK & Ireland Occupational and Environmental Epidemiology Society and its activities/events with SOM so this can be circulated to all the SOM/ FOM members.