**Occupational Medicine (OM) – What is it? When are OM specialty referrals indicated?**

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OM is a specialty certified by the American Board of Preventive Medicine. It is not a common medical specialty. In 2010 there were about 691,000 physicians and surgeons practicing in the U.S. Board certifications in OM from 1955 to 2013 total 4,047. The OM specialty covers a wide range of medical practice. A key focus of OM is consideration of capabilities for work and job demands, as they relate to health and safety in the workplace. OM specialist can deal with absence and productivity management, elements contributing to delayed recovery, fitting the job to the person, and understanding accommodations at work. There is an emphasis on understanding workers’ capabilities and needs, in order to help assure safety and health in the workplace. This can involve working as a team member with employees, human resources, labor relations, and unions, on safety, health, and work fitness issues.

Training in OM includes clinical medicine, and many subjects not typically covered in other clinical specialties, such as worksite factors related to health and safety, toxicology, industrial hygiene, epidemiology, biostatistics, ergonomics, wellness, productivity, disease and injury prevention, fitness for work, psychosocial issues related to work, and hazard recognition, evaluation, and control. Some programs emphasize training in business, management, computer applications, and research.

OM specialists are often board certified in other specialties, such as internal medicine, family practice, general surgery, orthopedics, other surgical specialties, or medical sub-specialties including pulmonary medicine, neurology, cardiology, emergency medicine, toxicology, dermatology, pain medicine, addiction medicine, ophthalmology, allergy and immunology, forensic medicine, psychiatry, rehabilitation, and others.

OM physicians may work in university or community hospital-based clinics, multi-specialty group practices, occupational medicine or travel medicine clinics, or employer-based clinics. Some may be advisers or consultants to public and private companies, or to governments. They may work within these organizations, dealing with clinical issues, prevention of injuries and disease, or analyzing, developing, and implementing policies and program, or managing occupational safety and health programs. They may be involved in risk management, health care benefits management, or evaluation of personal health care.

OM specialists are usually familiar with work fitness and disability integration, disaster preparedness and emergency management, public health and disease surveillance, occupational health and safety-related laws and regulations, health promotion, disease management, injury prevention, hazard control, disease or injury causation analysis, and the importance of work, health, and productivity in people’s lives.

Many OM specialists are familiar with, or work in, programs involving disability management, return to work/fitness for duty, impairment evaluations (AMA Guides to the Evaluation of Permanent Impairment), and the regulatory requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA), Medical Review Officer’s role in drug testing (MRO), Employee Retirement and Income Security Act requirements (ERISA) related to disability plans and appeals, and specialized examinations related to Workers’ Compensation, Independent Medical Examinations (IMEs), OSHA-mandated medical surveillance, Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) Examinations, and Department of Transportation (DOT) Commercial Drivers’ Certification.

OM reviewers bring their special knowledge of clinical issues, job-task demands, work environments, work fitness, impairment, residual function analysis, how these factors match work requirements, and how to formulate sensible, clear restrictions for work-related activities. Many have experience in assessing workplace hazards, advising employers and employees, and helping assure safe returns to work. When disability plan referrals for a peer review are made, an OM specialist is a good choice when an understanding of the job requirements and job demands is critical, when consideration and analysis of factors related to delayed recovery is needed, when work restrictions and accommodation are expected, and when the plan’s target is consideration of specialized occupations, or capabilities need to be weighed for own versus any occupation. When the claimant has completed a surgeon’s or other specialist’s treatment plan, but still has residual problems with function, an OM perspective can be helpful. If your plan requires the reviewer’s specialty to match the claimant’s doctor’s medical specialty, an OM reviewer, who is also boarded in that specialty, can provide a dimension of understanding about work and job functions that adds value to the review.

**References:**

3. American Board of Preventive Medicine, Occupational Medicine certification statistics, 03/28/2013.

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