



## International Occupational Health – “Current Situation and Future Trends”

An International Conference 16–17 November 2021  
Hotel Hilton Helsinki Kalastajatorppa, Finland

### **EASOM’s mission and OM education and training before and after COVID-19 pandemic**

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#### **INTRODUCTION**

EASOM was founded almost 30 years ago with the mission to promote cooperation between the institutions involved in Occupational Medicine training of doctors, in general, and occupational medical specialists, in particular, as well as other occupational health (OH) professionals. Furthermore, to develop the exchange of knowledge, skills and experiences in teaching and training between EASOM member institutions.

Its visions: to add value to members via access to European academic OM networks; improvement of European teaching for students curricula, specialist training and continuing professional development; exchange of students between EU-countries and the development of a quality assurance system for education and training that is endorsed and adopted by member schools.

The challenges facing OM have evolved over the last three decades and, consequently, so have the educational and training needs in this field. EASOM has launched a number of initiatives over the years to respond to the demands of the times.

#### **APPROACH**

This contribution is aimed to summarize and analyze EASOM's achievements in its almost 30-year history, and to identify the challenges we currently face.

#### **RESULTS**

*Unresolved issues that go back years and the EASOM respond*

In spite of all efforts done, there is still *no proper appreciation of the key role our specialty plays*. Education and training are highly valuable tools to change perceptions and get an end to this kind of blindness. To do that there is a reality we need to see and show and some thoughts can bring us to it. The specialty of Occupational Medicine (OM) is still under-valued by doctors and is not clearly recognized as an exceptionally important and influential medical discipline producing transversal knowledge and skills which are necessary for general medicine and the vast majority of medical specialties (1).

Among employees, the *misconception persists that OM represents employers' interests* and they are much more likely to turn to the family doctor or a public health system doctor before an occupational doctor. In practice, therefore, the family doctor is the person trusted most by workers when they need information or advice regarding work-related health problems, occupational hazards in their company or their fitness to return to work (2), even though we know family doctors and graduates in medicine in Europe generally receive very limited training in this field (3), and this is frequently insufficient for the responsibilities they are facing in real practice. As an example it is unreasonable to expect doctors to assist in the detection of occupational pathologies if they do not have appropriate resources and there is insufficient training and awareness raising (4). In 2014 a survey carried out by EASOM members (3) showed a suboptimal scenery in terms of OM undergraduate training in some EU-countries that required interventions for improvement.

*EASOM has participated in the development of a number of EU-projects and OM teaching modules* (i.e.: Leonardo Project on Risk communication for workers about health and safety issues). Among them EMUTOM and VIRTUAL PATIENTS projects\* must be highlighted (5,6). At present a new EU-project in Digitalization & Medical training (iCoViP) also based in PBL has been recently launched and supported by EASOM (<http://icovip.eu>) (Digitalized Education in Europe beyond the pandemic).

In 2021, our Association also *launched a series of webinars on topics currently relevant in OM*. These webinars can promote debate and reflections and have produced *educational videos* (freely accessible on EASOM YouTube channel; [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCKa9uGPJ23\\_ZpLaFI1KKUJw](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCKa9uGPJ23_ZpLaFI1KKUJw)).

A recent statement by EASOM supported the need for medical curricula, in undergraduate and graduate training, to include basic knowledge of OM/OH (1). Over the years, EASOM has also expressed this support with different activities, such as the EASOM Summer Schools which have proven to be an important exchange tool. This is the case of 2014 in Glasgow-EASOM Summer School, where *collaboration with other scientific societies dedicated to OM training such as UEMS was promoted* (past Summer Schools' information at EASOM website: [www.easom.eu](http://www.easom.eu)).

This collaboration has been essential to achieve the common goal of *developing the European Postgraduate Assessment in Occupational Medicine*. In fact, the first pan-European examination in the field of occupational medicine was carried out in January 2020 on the basis of a collaboration with EASOM. The evaluators, who rated the first European exam in the most favorable terms, described it as *a milestone in the history of our specialty*.

\*The first aimed to develop and evaluate a common European OM teaching module for OM training of EU undergraduate medical students. The module is free available online ([www.emutom.eu](http://www.emutom.eu)), it has been in use in European and non-EU countries and awarded by the EU (5). The second focused on creation and validation of innovative tools (Casus online platform/Virtual Patients (VP)) based on OM problem-based learning (PBL). The team also has brought a big bank of them available in several languages (6) and was also awarded (<https://virtualpatients.eu/2009/07/28/1494/>).

### *Other issues*

The progressive *decline in the number of specialists in OM in many EU-countries* is also worrying, constituting a pressing problem today, a key challenge for which we must seek an immediate, flexible, appropriate response. The proportion of doctors aged over 50 is higher among specialists in OM than in other specialties, suggesting retirements will outnumber new entrants, leading to a grave shortage of qualified specialists, impacting on the healthcare provided to workers and on the training and supervision of newly OM specialists.

### *What the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light*

The Covid-19 pandemic has been an endurance test for occupational safety and health (OSH) in the EU. OM professionals have been stretched to cope with the enormous demands placed on them in the field as a result of the pandemic. The paramount importance of the OM specialists in the fight against the pandemic, in the protection of workers and in the management of work activities has been clearly visible.

The training of doctors and nurses has required a special effort. Digitalization and hybrid educational approaches have been promoted in pandemic times and a debate is underway about their real advantages and best applications in training. 2021 EASOM Summer School was successfully dedicated to this topic (see EASOM website).

This is a special moment, not least because this terrible crisis has also brought opportunities as the present OM visibility which we shouldn't neglect.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

EASOM has made a valuable effort over the years to promote OM specialty and medical training on this field in EU-countries. Now EASOM and other OM scientific societies should take advantage of OM's current visibility to demand appropriate actions from politicians to respond all outstanding issues that keeps un-resolved.

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