

New practice puts emphasis on workplace health, safety

BY DONNA KASUBA

After juggling two practices simultaneously as the only dual board-certified specialist in occupational medicine and internal medicine in Berkshire County, Philip Adamo, M.D., has opened his own occupational healthcare practice, Occupational Medicine Services at 15 Stoddard Ave. in Pittsfield.

Adamo chose to devote himself exclusively to occupational medicine after deciding that it was too difficult to pursue both aspects of health care.

"I have the best of both worlds," said Adamo, who opened the practice in May. "Although I miss internal medicine and that doctor-patient relationship, I still take care of patients, I still teach, and I help employers with their regulatory needs."

Occupational Medicine Services offers evaluation and treatment of occupational diseases and injuries, job-site analysis, medical surveillance of workers who deal with hazardous substances ranging from heavy metals and chemicals to asbestos and hazardous waste, pre-placement evaluations, disability evaluations and modified duty programs.

The practice also provides Department of Transportation exams, vision screening, pulmonary function testing, electrocardiograms, phlebotomy for blood tests, alcohol and drug testing, immunization clinics, foreign travel clinics and employer education seminars.

"We have two roles: the preventive side, and, when the prevention doesn't work for whatever reason, we're there to help that employer," said Adamo. "A lot of employers do not know the regulations. Employers are better paying a little bit more money now than to get a fine by OSHA or to have an employee who has a permanent injury or illness."

Occupational Medicine Services currently works with 50 companies, both large and small, in a variety of industries. Adamo also serves as a consulting medical director at Griffin Hospital in Derby, Conn., performs work for Holyoke Hospital's Occupational Medicine Program and is launching a program in occupational medicine at North Adams Regional Hospital.

In opening his new practice on Stoddard Avenue, Adamo has returned full circle to where he practiced earlier in his internal medicine career. For 10 years, he and Dr. Patricia Lehmann, who has a practice on the main level, have owned the two-story building across North Street from the main entrance to Berkshire Medical Center.

Adamo invested \$70,000 renovating and equipping the 1,500-square-foot basement level for his current practice, which houses



Dr. Philip Adamo has established Occupational Medicine Services in an office building on Stoddard Avenue, just across North Street from the main entrance to Berkshire Medical Center. Working with him at the practice are office assistant Maria Leary (left) and nurse practitioner Patricia Kent (right).

two examination rooms, a hearing booth, consultation and staff offices, and a conference room.

Working with Adamo at the practice are nurse practitioner Patricia Kent and office assistant Maria Leary. Open Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Occupational Medicine Services also provides 24-hour service for drug and alcohol testing.

Medical and legal

In his field, Adamo deals with many aspects of medicine as well as legal issues. "I have to understand law, medicine and human resource issues," noted Adamo. "I have to be familiar with the workers' compensation laws in Massachusetts, Connecticut and New York and [those of] the federal government."

Adamo did not originally set out to become an expert in the field of occupational medicine. A native of Mount Vernon, N.Y., he graduated from Fordham University in 1978 and in 1982, from Universidad Del Moreste in Mexico.

His third and fourth years of training were spent at the University of Massachusetts Medical School and affiliate hospitals, including Berkshire Medical Center.

"I was only supposed to be here for six weeks to do pediatrics," recalled Adamo. "I came here on Labor Day in 1980. Physicians at BMC liked me and I liked them, and they wanted me to stay, so I did my rotations between BMC and UMass. Then I met my wife [the former Karen Gauthier]. A Pittsfield native, she's a nurse and wanted to stay here, so we stayed."

GEPlastics triggered another turning point in Adamo's medical career. The part-time doctor at GE was leaving, and Adamo was hired as his replacement. At GE, it was critical for Adamo to know the biological effects of chemicals, so he enrolled at the American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine and became board-certified in occupational medicine. He also earned his masters of public health degree from the Medical College of Wisconsin, while main-

taining his own internal medicine practice and working at GE, where he created an occupational medicine program.

Then, in 1994, after practicing internal medicine for seven years, Adamo left his private practice to spearhead the Occupational Health Department at Berkshire Medical Center. Under his direction, by 2003 the program grew from 40 companies to 400 clients.

Although occupational medicine has been around for a long time, it wasn't until the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) was instituted in 1971 as the enforcement arm of the Department of Labor that occupational health and safety started drawing more attention in the United States.

"At that time, the federal government said that employers needed to provide a safe and healthy work environment," said Adamo, who is also associate professor of medicine at the University of Massachusetts. "It started with a general duty clause. OSHA was not going to make a specific regulation for every chemical or hazard in the workplace. It was just too time-consuming."

OSHA performs inspections of workplaces, and employers who fail the test are slapped with fines and regulations. OSHA investigations are triggered by a number of conditions or events, such as a death due to injury in the workplace; or if an employee alerts OSHA about an unsafe work environment.

Job suitability

Although Adamo sometimes reviews cases for companies for which he has not seen the patient, he regularly performs a job-site analysis before rendering an employee evaluation. He has even driven UPS delivery trucks and donned protective gear to learn first-hand what his patients do and to determine exactly what they are exposed to.

"I go to the workplace to see how people work," said Adamo. "It's fascinating to see the process of how things are made at the companies I visit."

Some work environments, such as those with lime dust, asbestos, lead, arsenic and hazardous waste, demand that employees wear respirators and other personal protective equipment. Occupational Medicine Services provides medical clearance exams for respirator and protective equipment use as well as qualitative fit testing.

It is also important that a worker is matched properly to his or her job. Based on job descriptions supplied by employers, Adamo evaluates whether a person can perform duties of the job.

(By law an employer can hire a person for a job and then do a pre-placement exam to ensure that a person is put into a job for which he or she is physically and mentally fit. The old law used to be an employer could send a prospective employee for a pre-appointment exam, but that has since been ruled discriminatory. Instead, a company can hire a person and afterwards determine if any reasonable accommodations or restrictions are needed. If the accommodations are unreasonable, the company has the right to rescind its job offer.)

Adamo also investigates whether or not someone has a disability. "I have to understand the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Family Medical Leave Act because companies will come to me and say, 'Does this person have a disability for which I need to make a reasonable accommodation? Is it justified that this individual can be out of work for this problem for this amount of time?'"

Even if an injury prevents a worker from performing regular duties, a temporary alternate duty may be suitable. OSHA stresses that such transitional work must be useful and meaningful and not demeaning to the employee. Over a five-year period studies have demonstrated that such policies not only reduce workers' compensation claims but reduce the number of lost workdays.

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"Workers' compensation treatment is sought after the preventive side does not work," explained Adamo. "Without good workers, the United States would not be as prosperous. This joint commitment from labor and from management ensures that someone who truly has a work-related injury or illness gets compensated."

Adamo explained that the nature of his practice requires a different role than with most physicians.

"There's not a true doctor-patient relationship because these patients don't come here of their own will," said Adamo. "But ethically, in my mind and in what I do, these patients are ours. There is a provider-patient relationship. I've had people ask me, 'Could you be my private doctor?' I can't. There's a conflict there. I can help employee and employer, but I have to be neutral for both sides." ♦