

Occupational and Environmental Physician Interview questions

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What to expect

Interviews for occupational and environmental physician roles typically assess clinical reasoning, regulatory knowledge and your ability to work with employers and workers. You may be asked to discuss cases, demonstrate your understanding of work health and safety legislation and show how you manage competing interests.

- **Clinical reasoning:** Questions that test your approach to assessing fitness for duty, diagnosing occupational illness and managing complex cases.
- **Regulatory and compliance:** Questions about work health and safety legislation, health surveillance requirements and how you keep up to date with standards.
- **Behavioural:** Questions that ask you to describe past situations, often using the STAR method, to show how you handle disagreements, stakeholders and ethical dilemmas.
- **Scenario-based:** Hypothetical workplace situations, such as investigating an illness cluster or advising on hazard controls, to assess your judgement and problem-solving.
- **Stakeholder management:** Questions about how you communicate with employers, workers, insurers and treating practitioners, especially when interests conflict.
- **Technical:** Questions about your experience with specific tools and procedures, such as spirometry, audiometry and health surveillance software.

The interview usually involves a panel with a medical director, an HR representative and sometimes a senior colleague. It may include a clinical case discussion or a short presentation on a workplace health issue. After the interview, there are credential checks and referee reports. The process can take several weeks.

1. Walk me through your approach to assessing a worker's fitness for duty when they present with a chronic health condition that may affect their ability to perform safety-critical tasks.

Why they ask

This question tests your clinical reasoning and your ability to balance worker health with workplace safety. It also shows whether you can communicate complex assessments to employers.

How to structure your answer

Use a structured clinical process: history and examination, understanding the job demands, risk assessment, consideration of reasonable adjustments, and clear communication of recommendations. End with a summary of your decision-making.

Example answer

"I start by taking a thorough history of the condition, including current treatment, symptoms and functional limitations. Then I examine the worker, focusing on the physical and cognitive demands of their role. I ask for a detailed job demands analysis from the employer, if available, and visit the worksite if needed. I assess the risk of the condition affecting safety-critical tasks, such as operating machinery or driving. I consider whether reasonable adjustments can reduce that risk without compromising safety. Finally, I write a clear report for the employer and the worker, stating whether they are fit for duty, fit with restrictions, or temporarily unfit, and I recommend a review period. I always document my reasoning and communicate with the treating practitioner to ensure consistency."

2. Tell me about a time you had to manage a disagreement between an employer and a treating practitioner regarding a worker's return-to-work plan.

Why they ask

This behavioural question assesses your stakeholder management, conflict resolution and ability to stay neutral while advocating for the worker and the employer's obligations.

How to structure your answer

Use the STAR method: Situation, Task, Action, Result. Focus on how you gathered information from both sides, facilitated communication and reached a workable solution.

Example answer

"Situation: A worker had been off with a back injury, and the treating practitioner recommended a gradual return with no lifting. The employer wanted a full return to normal duties because they believed the worker was fit. Task: I needed to reconcile these views and develop a safe plan. Action: I arranged a case conference with the worker, the treating practitioner and the employer. I explained the medical restrictions and the employer's legal obligations. I proposed a graduated duties program that started with light tasks and increased over four weeks, with a review at each stage. I also organised a worksite assessment to identify equipment that could reduce manual handling. Result: The worker returned to full duties within six weeks, and the employer and practitioner both agreed the plan was fair and safe. The case was resolved without escalation."

3. You are asked to investigate a cluster of illness among workers at a manufacturing plant. How would you proceed?

Why they ask

This scenario question tests your investigative skills, knowledge of occupational epidemiology and ability to work with regulators and employers under pressure.

How to structure your answer

Use a stepwise investigation framework: confirm the cluster, gather data, form hypotheses, conduct workplace assessments, recommend controls and communicate findings. Show that you would involve relevant authorities as required.

Example answer

"First, I would confirm the cluster by reviewing medical records and speaking with workers and supervisors to understand the symptoms, timing and location. I would check if the numbers are above what we would expect. Then I would gather data on exposures, processes and controls, and review health surveillance records. I would form hypotheses about possible causes, such as a chemical exposure or poor ventilation. I would conduct a walkthrough of the plant, take air samples if needed and interview affected workers. I would involve the regulator if required by law. Based on findings, I would recommend controls like improved ventilation, PPE or process changes. I would also set up ongoing health monitoring and communicate the findings to workers and management in plain language. Finally, I would document everything and follow up to ensure controls are working."

4. How do you keep up to date with work health and safety legislation and guidelines, particularly around health surveillance and exposure standards?

Why they ask

This question assesses your commitment to professional development and regulatory compliance, which is critical in this role.

How to structure your answer

Explain your approach, then give specific examples of how you have applied updated knowledge in practice. Mention professional bodies, journals, conferences and regulator updates.

Example answer

"I maintain my fellowship with the Royal Australasian College of Physicians, which requires ongoing continuing professional development. I subscribe to updates from Safe Work Australia and state regulators like WorkCover and Comcare. I read journals such as Occupational Medicine and attend the annual conference of the Australasian Faculty of Occupational and Environmental Medicine. I also participate in peer review groups where we discuss recent cases and changes to legislation. For example, when the exposure standard for crystalline silica was updated, I reviewed our health surveillance program for construction workers and implemented more frequent spirometry and chest X-rays for at-risk employees. I make sure my recommendations are always based on the current legislation and best practice."

5. Describe a situation where you had to advise an employer that their proposed hazard controls were inadequate. How did you handle it?

Why they ask

This behavioural question evaluates your ability to influence without authority, communicate risk and maintain a constructive relationship with an employer.

How to structure your answer

Use STAR. Highlight how you presented evidence, explained the risk and offered practical alternatives.

Example answer

"Situation: An employer proposed to rely on respirators alone to control exposure to a solvent. Task: I needed to advise them that this was not adequate under the hierarchy of controls. Action: I prepared a report showing air monitoring results and explained that respirators are the least effective control and can fail. I suggested engineering controls like local exhaust ventilation and substitution with a less hazardous solvent. I offered to help them source vendors and estimate costs. I also arranged a meeting with the workers to explain the risks and get their input. Result: The employer agreed to install ventilation and switch to a safer solvent. Exposure levels dropped significantly, and the workers reported fewer headaches and respiratory symptoms. The employer appreciated the practical approach and we continued to work together on other safety improvements."

6. What is your experience with spirometry and audiometry in occupational health surveillance?

Why they ask

This technical question checks your hands-on skills and understanding of how these tools fit into a health surveillance program.

How to structure your answer

Provide a concise technical explanation, then give examples of how you have used these tools to detect early disease and advise on controls. Mention calibration, quality assurance and interpretation.

Example answer

"I have performed spirometry and audiometry for many years in various industries, including mining and manufacturing. I am trained in the American Thoracic Society standards for spirometry and the relevant Australian standards for audiometry. I ensure equipment is calibrated daily and that tests are conducted in a quiet environment. I interpret results by comparing them to predicted values and previous tests. For example, I detected a pattern of declining lung function in a group of welders, which led to a review of fume extraction and the introduction of respiratory protection. In another case, audiometry identified early noise-induced hearing loss in a construction worker, prompting a review of hearing protection and noise controls. I always explain results to workers and provide clear advice on prevention."