

Alberta Doctors' Digest

Exceptional physicians: Dr. Ken Corbet

Welcome to the AMA's ongoing series about exceptional physicians in Alberta. What does that mean? It can mean physicians who have received awards or other recognition. Maybe it's all about the advocacy work they've done or their involvement with the Alberta Medical Association. It can also be about special projects and interesting passions. In any case, these are exceptional people, and we want to get to know them better.

This time around we're featuring the outstanding work, advocacy and contributions of Dr. Ken Corbet. He's a specialist in occupational medicine in Calgary and a recent recipient of the Honorary Membership Award from the Canadian Medical Association.

Dr. Corbet's work and contributions have been noticed. Previously, Dr. Corbet received an award from the Alberta Medical Association, which recognized his dedicated work on committees and clinical documents for more than 30 years.

What motivated Dr. Corbet to get involved as an AMA member?

"Firstly, this would be back in the very early 1990s, we were developing a guidance document to help family physicians make decisions about an employee or a worker or a patient returning to work after being ill or being injured," says Dr. Corbet. "There was really nothing, any sort of guidance for doctors, so that is the first notable document that had the AMA's name on it."

Throughout his career in occupational medicine, Dr. Corbet has focused on running continuing education events, supporting resident attendance and travel, and other areas to promote occupational medicine.

What is Dr. Corbet passionate about?

Dr. Corbet is passionate about toxicology, poison centres, and translating job requirements and working conditions into medical standards. He is also deeply experienced in assessing risks and safety problems in the workplace.

"Aside from having a treatment clinic at the University of Calgary for 25 years," Dr. Corbet says, "there's a whole upstream preventive component which has to do with reducing hazards in the workplace."

Reducing hazards, he explains, can include reducing noise levels, limiting benzene exposure and ensuring lead contamination is contained.

“For example, if you’re a locomotive engineer or a pilot or a heavy equipment operator up at Fort McMurray, what are the key medical conditions that we need to check to make sure you’re safe and able to do the job safely?”

Dr. Corbet also notes that occupational medicine has one foot in public health and one foot in good, interesting, challenging clinical medicine. And it was during the pandemic when everyone was highly aware of public health that he realized he actually does public health in the workplace.

Dr. Corbet says he deals with medical diseases and fitness to do jobs and often sits at tables with many other professions. “I need to have a basic understanding of safety procedures, how to build a safety culture, how to track near misses and prevent those,” he says. “I also have to understand how an industrial hygienist would measure noise or chemicals in the air at a workplace.”



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- Dr. Ken Corbet

Dr. Ken Corbet (photo credit: Marvin Polis)

With his expertise in doing this work for decades, what conclusions has he drawn?

“If we look at the workplace, it’s clear that large organizations who look at their regulatory responsibilities in all areas often have good, effective health programs for their employees,” says Dr. Corbet. “But it’s small business owners that simply don’t have those resources or necessarily the insight to know what’s needed.”

What changes would Dr. Corbet make to the health care system to make his work even more effective?

“Much of the work I do is outside of the publicly funded system,” he says. “These workplace programs are usually paid for by the company. They will also be paying their Workers’ Compensation premiums for any accidents and injuries that might occur. We

have to look at the interaction between the workplace and Workers' Compensation, for example, with the publicly funded system.”

Overall, he says there could be a better appreciation for just how crucial the workplace is in health. “It’s been a pleasure to work with the Alberta Medical Association,” Dr. Corbet concludes. “I’ve strongly felt that outside of our clinical practices, we have a professional responsibility to group together, reflect, enjoy some social time – but make sure that issues affecting us or our patient base, or in my case, the workplace population, are brought to the attention of the AMA so they can look at what action might be appropriate.”