

Working as a haematologist

New Zealand haematologist talk about the reality of working within this field

Why did you choose haematology and what do you like most?

Haematology is a dynamic, exciting and progressive specialty and huge advances in treatment and diagnostic technologies continue to be made. The diversity in the specialty enables most doctor to pursue areas that particularly interest them. On the clinical side haematology offers close contact with a relatively small number of patients.

What strengths and abilities make a good haematologist?

In all areas of the specialty it is necessary to develop recognition of the molecular and cellular mechanisms in the pathogenesis of disease. It is helpful to have a wide medical knowledge and an interest in puzzles and problem solving. At times you may have to select appropriate treatment options based on limited clinical evidence, so you need to be able to cope with uncertainty. You must also be able to form close and empathetic bonds with patients and be able to relate to patients at all stages of their disease. You need to be understanding and compassionate and want to work with patients and families and often at times when they are terminally ill.

As a specialist, can you describe a typical day?

Laboratory work might include reviewing blood films, bone marrow collecting and reporting, reporting of other blood tests, liaising with GPs and specialists, developing new tests and undertaking research. Clinical work might include ward rounds and consultations, outpatient chemotherapy or treatment, bone marrow transplantation and clinical research.

What do you think are the future challenges of haematology?

There are ongoing challenges for specialists to keep abreast of the rapid developments in disease diagnosis and new treatment possibilities. Funding of some of these new treatments will remain difficult in public medicine due to resource constraints.

What advice would you give someone thinking about a career in haematology?

You should talk to local haematologists to express interest in the specialty and gain advice, and you should do a rotation in haematology to see if you enjoy the work. You need to be aware that the dual training programme involves four years of advanced training with pathology and physician exams.

What are future opportunities in haematology?

Opportunities are excellent as there is currently a shortage of trained specialists in Australasia.

What is the work/life balance like?

Haematology is a flexible specialty and will accommodate options, though it would probably be easier to take time out before embarking on training or after completion of the programme.

Haematology requires a more prolonged programme of training and examination than many other specialties, which may potentially delay appointment as a consultant. Once you have completed training the work hours are extremely reasonable and relatively little call work is required.

What are the disadvantages of haematology?

Some areas of the haematology, especially malignant haematology, may require you to cope with the considerable stress of supporting terminally ill patients and their families.

Any comments on the current training?

Experience can be gained in rotation while you are a house surgeon or medical registrar. The dual training programme is rigorous and lengthy, although it is now possible to complete pathology-only or physician-only qualifications in haematology.