

Working as a cardiothoracic surgeon

New Zealand cardiothoracic surgeons talk about the reality of working within this field

Why did you choose cardiothoracic surgery and what do you like most?

Cardiothoracic surgery involves delicate techniques that are technically demanding and challenging. The results can be extremely rewarding.

What strengths and abilities make a good cardiothoracic surgeon?

You need to have a strong work ethic and you must be prepared to commit to the specialty. As well as possessing excellent knowledge of the underlying science for preoperative diagnosis, you need above-average technical abilities for the challenging intraoperative techniques that are involved. Being able to function effectively as part of a team is crucial since cardiothoracic surgery involves working with medical and nursing staff to achieve the best possible result. Stamina and competence are essential, as is the ability to cope in a crisis

As a specialist, can you describe a typical day?

In comparison with work in other subspecialties, a relatively large proportion of the week is spent in surgery. On average you might spend five or six half-days in the operating room and half a day consulting. For a hospital-based specialist the day would usually commence with an 8.00am ICU ward round, followed by morning and afternoon sessions in theatre (8.30am to 12.30pm and 1.00pm to 5.00pm). The last hour or two of the working day might be spent preparing for cases for the following day and catching up on paperwork and dictation. The call roster is light but you do need to be available to re-operate on your own elective cases (usually the night or day after surgery).

What do you think are the future challenges of cardiothoracic surgery?

Surgeons are being required to operate on hearts that are in increasingly poor condition. A major challenge that faces this specialty is the reduction of neurological complications and mortality rates following surgery. Technical advances continue to be made, although it remains to be seen whether government funding will enable the possibilities of robotic surgery to be explored and implemented.

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

It is recommended that you should talk to local surgeons and spend six months as a registrar in the specialty. To succeed in this field you need to be hard-working, bright and competent.

What are future opportunities in cardiothoracic surgery?

At present, there is strong demand for cardiothoracic surgeons which should continue for at least the short to medium term. Although opportunities in paediatric cardiothoracic surgery are limited in New Zealand, there is plenty of demand internationally if you show potential.

What is the work/life balance like?

There is a prolonged training period for this specialty so registrars may find it difficult to take time out from training, although the College accommodates individual needs on a case-by-case basis. Several cardiothoracic specialists have successfully taken parental leave in recent years. One female surgeon reported that she manages to combine work with having a family. She suggests that you do require support from home but that nothing is impossible. Work as a specialist offers opportunities for travel and involves attending conferences internationally once or twice each year.

One specialist said that cardiothoracic surgery has had a significant impact on her family life, but that this is not necessarily negative if you enjoy your job and derive satisfaction from it. Another surgeon said that the lifestyle is no different than for any other surgical specialty and that he accommodates the needs of his family around his work commitments.

What are the disadvantages of cardiothoracic surgery?

You must be available for consultation and surgery at inconvenient times. The hours of work can be long and it can be very stressful when patients fare badly. In future, the development of percutaneous techniques may reduce demand for the services of cardiothoracic surgeons.