

Working as a general medicine specialist

New Zealand general medicine specialist talk about the reality of working within this field

Why did you choose general medicine and what do you like most?

General medicine is a diverse and challenging specialty. You deal with a wide range of conditions and patients and every day is different. The specialty is broad-based and allows you to keep your options open, although there are many areas of medicine to explore and take special interest in.

What strengths and abilities make a good general medicine specialist?

Communication is the most important skill, as it is vital that you keep patients informed and listen to their concerns. You also need to be able to work effectively with other health professionals responsible for the ongoing care of the patient. You should be a team player and a problem solver and you should possess common sense and enthusiasm. It is also important to be able to live with uncertainty since you may have to make diagnoses based on limited clinical evidence.

As a specialist, can you describe a typical day?

Most general medicine specialists in New Zealand public hospitals are involved in the care of inpatients admitted with acute medical problems. They supervise junior staff who are responsible for day-to-day patient care, and are available on-call to provide advice for their junior staff as required. The frequency of this commitment varies depending on the number of physicians employed at the particular hospital and on the volume of admissions. Typically it might involve one or two days in the week.

Inpatient ward rounds normally take place after acute admitting days and on at least two regular days during the week. Most specialists hold between two and four general outpatient clinics per week. Some specialists also participate in specialty clinics or private practice. Work that does not involve direct patient contact is also a significant part of the daily schedule, particularly for hospital-based specialists, and may include undergraduate and postgraduate teaching, management responsibilities and CPD (continuing professional development) activities. Many general medicine specialists are also sub-specialists so their time may be divided between these roles.

What do you think are the future challenges of general medicine?

General medicine remains alive and well within New Zealand. Recent years have seen an increasing number of NZ advanced trainees dual training in general medicine and a subspecialty, because many jobs require general medical responsibilities in addition to subspecialty knowledge. As the population ages, there will be an increasing number of elderly patients presenting with multiple comorbidities, so the role of the general physicians will become even more crucial. (See www.racp.edu.au/hpu/workforce for further discussion of these issues).

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

One contributor commented that it is definitely worth trying out general medicine and there are plenty of options once you have completed basic physician training.

What are future opportunities in general medicine?

In New Zealand at present there are good employment opportunities for physicians trained in general medicine. There will always be a need for physicians who possess a broad-based approach to diagnosing and treating cases, and general medicine complements subspecialty practice in most areas of general medicine.

What is the work/life balance like?

The system is reasonably flexible so it is possible to job-share during training. After you have qualified there are opportunities for part time work and job-sharing, particularly in private practice.

General medicine affords a better lifestyle than specialties such as anaesthesia or surgery and it is quite common for consultants to have weekends free. There is little likelihood of being called in to the hospital after-hours, particularly after midnight. In smaller centres with less experienced junior staff the after-hours work may be more onerous, though in many places this is starting to be recognised in remuneration arrangements.

What are the disadvantages of general medicine?

General medicine can be hard work at times and is currently disadvantaged in terms of remuneration in comparison with procedural specialties.

Any comments on the current training?

The FRACP Part I examination requires intense preparation for up to nine months in advance. When you are deciding which subspecialty (if any) to focus on, you should talk to consultants and registrars who work in that field. If you are interested in pursuing a subspecialty at a large hospital in New Zealand it is advisable to gain work experience overseas after qualifying.