

Working as a psychiatrist

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

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

It is a rewarding specialty because you are given the privilege of listening to patients' ideas and stories, and you can make a real difference to their lives. The discipline is an academic one, concerned with the philosophical and ethical sides of medicine, and there are never easy answers. Psychiatry is strongly team-based and less hierarchical in structure than many clinical fields. Colleagues and fellow trainees are generally extremely supportive of one another.

What strengths and abilities make a good psychiatrist?

You must be able to cope with the intellectual rigours of this discipline, and you should possess good problem solving skills. It is important to have very good interpersonal skills, a level of maturity with good intuition and self-awareness, and you must be able to relate to people of all backgrounds.

As a specialist, can you describe a typical day?

The typical schedule will vary according to the area or subspecialty of psychiatry - the routines of a specialist working in an in-patient unit, for example, differ from those of a community psychiatrist. Some work may be clinic-based and some may involve domiciliary assessment or liaison with a wide variety of agencies. Common factors across the discipline will usually include clinical assessments, team-based reviews and management planning, supervision of other professionals and trainees, and active clinical teaching. Research and academic roles are available.

What do you think are the future challenges of psychiatry?

Psychiatry has made significant advances in the last 50 years with the development of increasingly effective pharmacological and psychological treatments and social and cultural rehabilitation and recovery approaches. Knowledge with regard to causes of mental illness has expanded, and the specialty is on the threshold of further discoveries. It is a priority to achieve de-stigmatisation regarding the general public perception of those with psychiatric disorders.

What are future opportunities in psychiatry?

Christchurch is currently the only location in New Zealand where there is are enough psychiatrists for the size of the population. There are still shortages elsewhere, so finding a job at the end of training should not be a problem.

What is the work/life balance like?

There are opportunities to work overseas during training, but you need to check with the College in advance that the proposed training programme is suitable for accreditation. Breaks in training are

relatively easily accommodated, but there are overall limits beyond which the currency of earlier training can expire (e.g. an 8 year limit in basic training).

Women make up a good proportion of psychiatric consultants, it is common to undertake training part time while bringing up children. The College supports part time training but recommends an initial full-time year to gain some experience of the specialty before switching to part time. Job sharing posts are usually available, and there are a small number of 0.5FTE posts in Auckland.

On call cover is call-back from home. The consensus is that after-hours commitments are not too bad- it would be usual to be rostered on-call for one evening in eight, and for night shifts about one week in eight. Weekend shifts (about one in four) are usually split so that you do not work the entire weekend. With the ability to work part-time and take parental leave breaks, psychiatry training accommodates those with families well.

What are the disadvantages and requirements of psychiatry?

There is a great deal of administration, but this problem is common to most specialties in medicine. Litigation does not pose a major problem, but you could expect to receive a few complaints during the course of your career. Note that all the services are now using electronic records, so an ability to type and manage computer interfaces is required. You also need to be able to drive when on call.

Any comments on the current training?

A great deal of support is provided to assist trainees in achieving their training goals. There is a strong emphasis on supervision, coaching and the apprenticeship model. Auckland has an increasingly strong reputation for providing a good quality academic programme and support for trainees to complete the college case histories and examinations.