

Working in public health



Dr Lavinia Perumal is a Public Health Registrar at Auckland District Health Board.

“Public health medicine is a versatile and interesting career choice with ever changing opportunities - during your training and after. The training scheme in New Zealand opens the door to meeting motivating public health leaders and is constantly evolving to meet the challenges of modern training requirements”.



Dr Daniel Williams is the Clinical Director of Public Health Services for Canterbury and the West Coast. He works with a team of six other public health specialists, all of whom have been involved in the Christchurch earthquake response and are still involved in recovery. Daniel was the Public Health Incident Controller for both the September 2010 and February 2011 earthquakes.

“What we contribute as public health specialists is not just our skills, it’s our connections. This experience has high-lighted the importance of having a strong on-going public health presence; it’s about having local connections. You really can’t do public health without being part of the community you work with.”



Dr Ramon Pink (Te Aupouri) began his medical career in general practice and is now a public health medicine specialist working as a Medical Officer of Health. Ramon’s advice to anyone thinking about a career in public health is simple.

“Life experience and clinical experience are very valuable assets for a public health physician. I think that there is a divide between public health and personal health that needs to be bridged; being connected to clinicians enhances my contribution, especially in my area of communicable diseases. There is a danger of becoming too theoretical and life experience helps to maintain the connection with people.”

New Zealand public health specialists talk about the reality of working within this field

Why did you choose public health and what do you like most?

The main reason for pursuing public health medicine is the belief that you are making a difference to improving health at a population level. You deal with a range of health care professionals and the job varies widely in its focus - there can be outbreaks of disease that require immediate attention, but

there is also a substantial amount of long-term planning that concentrates on projects and unravelling complex issues. The career path is flexible and there are many different roles available, including working for primary care organisations, district health boards, academic institutions or the Ministry of Health or undertaking consultancy work.

What strengths and abilities make a good public health specialist?

It is essential to have good negotiation skills, to work well as an equal member of a multidisciplinary team and to be able to take advice from other health care professionals. Flair for project management is an important attribute - you need to be able to prioritise, think strategically and work to tight deadlines. It is necessary to have strong numeracy skills and be proficient at analysing and interpreting information. You need to be able to see the 'big picture' since you have to think of disease from a population perspective. Because the job involves conveying information to a wide and varied audience, public health physicians need to be able to communicate effectively both in writing and in speech.

As a specialist, can you describe a typical day?

A typical daily schedule varies considerably according to the setting in which you practise. The role may include controlling population hazards such as environmental or infectious diseases, providing epidemiological analyses, writing policy documents, managing complex projects in community or hospital settings, undertaking health care research, teaching in public health medicine or conducting public health programmes in developing countries.

What do you think are the future challenges of public health?

Funding constraints pose an ongoing concern. There is also a degree of uncertainty associated with frequent changes in health structures, agendas and priorities.

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

Your clinical background will inform the decisions you make in public health medicine, so it is advisable to spend some time in clinical medicine first if you are considering this career path. It is a good idea to acquire a wide range of skills that may be useful in many areas of public health medicine. Some public health physicians continue to practise clinical medicine on a part time basis, but if you are looking to undertake public health medicine full time you must be sure that you are happy to discontinue clinical contact with patients.

What are future opportunities in public health?

There is some disagreement over perceptions of the job market. One specialist said that job opportunities are not particularly favourable as there are many people working in public health medicine already, although more jobs are available in rural areas. Another specialist believes that the workforce projections are optimistic, with many new opportunities emerging. Changes in health structures will inevitably have an effect on job opportunities, and to some extent employment prospects depend on your ability to build relationships with potential employers when you are working as a public health medicine registrar.

What is the work/life balance like?

It is possible to train in public health medicine part time, or to take leave from the training programme if necessary. After training you can elect to work overseas in public health medicine, but you would need to meet the requirements of the local medical registration authority.

This specialty makes it easy to fit your career around your lifestyle, and compared with clinical medicine the impact on family life is minimal.

What are the disadvantages of public health?

Because there is none of the immediacy of patient contact found in clinical medicine, the sense of achievement may be a delayed one - it often takes years or decades for new health strategies to come to fruition. It can be frustrating that funding constraints and uncertainties in the health system sometimes limit the extent of achievements.

Any comments on the current training?

The Master of Public Health, undertaken during basic training, is a useful course that helps you to move from individual-focussed clinical medicine to conceptualising population health. The MPH is currently mandatory for achieving Basic Training. After you complete the Master's degree it is necessary to work some time in a public health unit and then to find your own job attachments (usually lasting between six months and a year). The training programme and informal networks do exist in New Zealand to provide assistance with this, and trainee training sessions are organised on a regular basis.