

# Working as a general practitioner

## New Zealand GPs talk about the reality of working within this field

### **Why did you choose general practice and what do you like most?**

Human interaction is the most appealing aspect of general practice. Unlike many hospital-based disciplines, general practice enables you to build close long-term relationships with patients. I like to be able to take care of whole families.

### **What strengths and abilities make a good GP?**

Patients need to feel comfortable to ask questions, so it is important that you possess good communication skills and be approachable. You need to be adaptable since significant changes are occurring in the profession. You also need to know the limits of your knowledge and expertise and be able to refer patients for specialist consultation when necessary.

### **As a specialist, can you describe a typical day?**

Doctors who own or part-own a practice can choose their hours of work and arrange for associates to cover times that they are absent. Usual weekday hours for a GP are between 8.00am and 6.00pm. You can also expect to work some weekends. Associates may work any number of hours, from two half days per week to full time. For this reason the specialty is particularly suited to those who wish to work on a part time basis. Evenings are often covered by an after-hours agency, or in rural regions, by a roster of local doctors. Some GPs choose to work in Accident & Medical centres - shifts usually last eight to 12 hours and you can work as many as you like.

### **What do you think are the future challenges of general practice?**

It is an ongoing challenge to keep up with rapid changes that occur in the health system. As primary care moves to adopt some of the tasks that have traditionally been in the domain of the secondary sector, many GPs are choosing to subspecialise in particular areas. Increasingly, GPs must build and work with multidisciplinary teams as more patients are managed in the community. The ageing population will affect general practice, with increasing numbers of patients presenting with multiple medical problems.

### **What advice would you give someone thinking about a career in general practice?**

Once you have qualified as a GP it is recommended that you spend some time as a locum or as an associate in a practice.

### **What are future opportunities in general practice?**

There is a shortage of GPs in New Zealand and as the secondary sector comes under pressure, the primary sector is increasingly seen as the most cost-effective way to manage many health problems.

Opportunities are being created for GPs to subspecialise in areas such as minor surgery, asthma management, diabetes management, congestive heart failure, STD management and mental health.

**What is the work/life balance like?**

General practice is very flexible and allows specialists to travel and take time out. You can adjust your hours of work to accommodate other demands so the impact on family life can be minimised.

One GP said that she manages to balance her career with family life. Although travel is an important component of the job and you must keep abreast of changes in the specialty, it is certainly possible to make up time in the evenings or on weekends in order to be available for important occasions such as school events.

**What are the disadvantages of the general practice?**

There is a significant amount of paperwork, which can be very time-consuming and frustrating.

**Any comments on the current training?**

There are always more applicants for registrar positions in the stage one general practice education programme than there are positions, so it helps if you can be flexible about the location of placements. Study is typically about five hours per week during training and you are expected to accommodate this around your work as a registrar. Registrars receive a training bursary.