

## Working in medical law

### New Zealand medical law specialists talk about the reality of working within this field

#### **Why did you choose medical law and what do you like most?**

One specialist said that medical law is more of a medical specialty than a legal one, since an understanding of the realities of medical practice is more important than the legal knowledge itself. The field is one that is still emergent and is experiencing continuing growth.

#### **What strengths and abilities make a good medical law specialist?**

You need to be comfortable retraining. The curriculum in law is wide ranging and the degree requires high standards of analysis and writing. Good interpersonal skills are essential in practice as a specialist, and you will need to be able to adopt an approach that balances objectivity with humanity. Those who bring added value to employment in this area are those who have clinical experience in medicine and possess an understanding of the realities of working within the health sector.

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

For a legal advisor to medical practitioners, a typical day might include on-call availability for medico-legal advice, assistance with submissions to ACC, the Health and Disability Commissioner or the Medical Council, strategy setting with barristers, case management, appearance at advocacy and mediation conferences and involvement with teaching and workshops.

#### **What do you think are the future challenges of medical law?**

There is likely to be an increasing demand for individuals who have completed dual qualifications in medicine and law and who have gained some years of clinical experience in medicine.

#### **What advice would you give someone thinking about a career in medical law?**

You should be mindful that it requires substantial retraining in a completely new discipline and that there is some degree of risk for employment possibilities. There are no specific training posts available in this field, but it would be useful to maintain a part time clinical position both to sustain and broaden your clinical experience and to generate income. It would be possible to undertake after-hours Accident & Medical employment to allow for full time study, although this would be a major commitment, especially if you have family to consider. It is not necessary to undertake medical specialty training prior to or after completing a law degree but a wide knowledge across medical disciplines is preferable. It is not essential to complete Honours in law but it would probably be worthwhile and does not involve a significantly heavier study load.

### **What are future opportunities in medical law?**

Opportunities in the medico-legal field are increasing. Possible positions include acting as a legal advisor for medical defence organisations, the Health and Disability commissioner or ACC, a risk manager for district health board, a coroner or practising as an independent barrister. Employment is possible immediately after graduation, though there are limited numbers of jobs available that offer work in medicine and law. Possibilities include the Office of the Health and Disability Commissioner or firms that provide district health board legal representation. Increasingly, many of the larger law firms (and some of the smaller firms) are employing staff who specialise in health care law. If you are aiming for employment in this area you should try to secure a 'summer clerkship' with one such firm during the university holiday break.

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

During training, it is probably not any more difficult to take time out than it would be in any other area of specialty. Part time work is an option while you are training or after you have qualified. The Bachelor of Law can be undertaken on either a full or part time basis but you should preferably study at least half time in the interests of completing the degree.

If you are retraining and managing a clinical job at the same time then the study schedule will certainly impact on your availability to family. Once training is complete, the after-hours lifestyle is better than for most specialty areas of medicine.

### **What are the disadvantages of the medical law?**

Areas of employment in New Zealand are limited at present because of the ACC system that deals with medical misadventure.