

Working as a radiation oncologist

New Zealand radiation oncologists talk about the reality of working within this field

Why did you choose radiation oncology and what do you like most?

The discipline covers a wide spectrum of medical specialties and is both technically and intellectually challenging. The field of cancer medicine is changing rapidly and significant research opportunities are available. It can be extremely rewarding to develop relationships with patients and their families during the stages of diagnosis and treatment. Radiation oncology necessitates that you strive to provide quality of care for patients throughout all phases of their illness. As a result, work in this discipline can be incredibly satisfying.

What strengths and abilities make a good radiation oncologist?

You need to possess compassion, humanity and a sense of reality as well as good interpersonal and communication skills. It is also important that you should enjoy working in a multidisciplinary environment.

As a specialist, can you describe a typical day?

Radiation oncology is hospital-based and provides services predominantly in an outpatient setting. During a typical day you would expect to assess new patients, formulate management plans, counsel patients and their families and review patients who are receiving radiation therapy. The technical aspects of radiation treatments are planned in detail by radiation oncologists. Much of this planning requires the integration of pathology and diagnostic radiology, and is performed using sophisticated computers. The daily schedule also involves making ward rounds, attending multidisciplinary meetings and completing administrative work

What do you think are the future challenges of radiation oncology?

The field of cancer medicine is changing rapidly with the development of new techniques and different ways of scheduling and integrating multimodality therapy to treat cancer. Challenges will include how to incorporate these advances in the clinical setting and how to manage the limited resources that are available

What advice would you give someone thinking about a career in radiation oncology?

It is important that you gain a good grounding in basic clinical skills before entering radiation oncology, so you should spend a minimum of two years as a house officer (preferably more) and obtain experience at registrar level. This experience will equip you with professional 'maturity' before you embark on what can be a stressful as well as hugely rewarding specialty, and one that will rely on your medical and compassionate skills.

What is the work/life balance like?

You should aim to complete Part II before changing to part time or taking time off because it is important to maintain momentum between Parts I and II. You are encouraged to gain overseas experience during or after training.

A full-time specialist would typically work 45-50 hours per week. There is some on-call work but generally this is not onerous. Registrars work 45-55 hours per week, with call work which can sometimes be done from home but often necessitates travel back to the hospital (particularly at weekends). In addition, registrars must find time for study.

What are the disadvantages of radiation oncology?

Radiation oncology can be a stressful and harrowing area of work. Cases are often tragic, particularly those involving young people and children, and patients often die. As with many other medical specialities, resources are limited. However it can be immensely satisfying and rewarding to work in a field where compassion, interpersonal skills and commitment to high quality care can make a vast difference to patients and their families.

Any comments on the current training?

There is increasing competition for places in the training programme and it may help if you are flexible about the location of training. Approved radiation oncology training centres are only found in the main cities in New Zealand.