

Working as an orthopaedic surgeon

New Zealand orthopaedic surgeons talk about the reality of working within this field

Why did you choose orthopaedic surgery and what do you like most?

Orthopaedic surgeons lead busy working lives seeing and treating patients with organic problems that (in many cases) are amenable to surgical management. The specialty is attractive because it is very practical and the results are readily tangible. Colleagues in this field are generally very supportive of one another and enthusiastic members of their professional body, the New Zealand Orthopaedic Association. In general, orthopaedic surgeons are passionate about their work and go to work not only to make a living and help their patients, but also for the great enjoyment they derive from their work and from contact with their colleagues.

What strengths and abilities make a good orthopaedic surgeon?

You must be able to communicate with patients and colleagues. You will need to be energetic and capable of a moderate to heavy workload and you should possess aptitude for acquiring technical and procedural skills. Common sense and good clinical judgement are essential.

As a specialist, can you describe a typical day?

A typical working day for a hospital-based consultant usually commences somewhere between 7.00am and 8.00am and finishes somewhere around (or after) 5.00pm. There is a heavy component of patient care in most orthopaedic schedules, with consultations, pre-operative checks, surgery and post-operative follow-up, as well as outpatient clinics.

What do you think are the future challenges of orthopaedic surgery?

Orthopaedic surgery remains a rapidly expanding field. Orthopaedic knowledge and technology is expanding exponentially resulting each year in new procedures and significant new ways of helping and treating patients. The aging population and the desire to remain active into old age present particular challenges.

What advice would you give someone thinking about a career in orthopaedic surgery?

It would be helpful to discuss the specialty with individual orthopaedic surgeons to find out what they perceive as being the advantages and disadvantages of a career in this field. You can also discuss this with your local representative on the Education Committee at the NZ Orthopaedics Association. You should be aware before entering the training programme that the clinical training schedule is arduous. If you enter this specialty you can look forward to a busy life of consulting and surgery, though there are also considerable opportunities for teaching and research.

What are future opportunities in orthopaedic surgery?

With the increasing average age of the population and the advancement of technology there will be a significant increase in demand for the services of orthopaedic surgeons in the future. The problem will be securing funding, either from private or public sources, to finance treatment options and procedures. It is also possible for orthopaedic surgeons to develop academic careers based either on surgical or research practice. The specialty offers research opportunities in diverse areas that include molecular biology and engineering.

What is the work/life balance like?

New Zealand needs a greater proportion of female orthopaedic surgeons. Orthopaedic surgery has provided most practising surgeons with great opportunities for travel. It is possible to spend a proportion of basic and training overseas but most surgeons in training defer travel until they have completed their fellowship examination and then generally spend between one and two years obtaining additional training overseas. Overseas conferences provide ongoing opportunities for surgeons who have returned to New Zealand and established themselves in practice and many surgeons commonly travel overseas to conferences twice a more per year.

It is important to have the support of spouse and family as ongoing clinical care can impact on family life. Most orthopaedic surgeons, however, manage to find a satisfactory balance between the conflicting needs of work, lifestyle and relationships.

Any comments on the current training?

It would be worthwhile talking to registrars who have been accepted into the programme to gain an understanding of what the selection process entails. or speak to your local NZOA Education Committee representative. Specialists have commented that training is arduous, but if undertaken with the right attitude it should be a highly enjoyable and rewarding period of your career.