

Working as a nuclear medicine specialist

New Zealand nuclear medicine specialists talk about the reality of working within this field

Why did you choose nuclear medicine and what do you like most?

One specialist said that he chose nuclear medicine out of curiosity and stayed because he enjoyed the intellectual challenge and the fact that it is a developing area of modern medicine.

What strengths and abilities make a good nuclear medicine specialist?

You should possess a broad spectrum of medical knowledge and feel comfortable with science subjects. You must also be able to work effectively with non-medical staff who are expert in their own individual branches of the specialty.

As a specialist, can you describe a typical day?

For a hospital-based specialist in nuclear medicine, work involves 'office hours' of 8.30am to 5.00pm with call-back once or twice a week. The nature of the nuclear medicine means that most scans are scheduled, and there is a degree of flexibility in the daily workload since technical staff perform the actual scanning of patients.

What do you think are the future challenges of nuclear medicine?

One specialist said marketing as a key challenge. While nuclear medicine has a good and expanding range of services, diagnostic specialties in New Zealand are competing for limited resources and referrals. It will be necessary to persuade other clinicians of the value of information provided by the specialty.

There are two current growth areas in the workload. The first is PET scanning. This uses cyclotron-produced radioisotopes, and requires a high level of technical and clinical input into the work. Overseas the PET imaging workload is increasing at almost 10% per year. The second is considerable growth in the regulatory and quality assurance requirements. The successful nuclear medicine specialist of the future will spend increasing amounts of their resources dealing with these non-clinical aspects of the work.

What advice would you give someone thinking about a career in nuclear medicine?

Training should be undertaken overseas - Australia has an excellent training programme and a strong reputation for involvement in research and development.

What are future opportunities in nuclear medicine?

In New Zealand opportunities are low. Nuclear medicine is underdeveloped here and the only significant growth over the past 20 years has been in the private sector. Opportunities are better

internationally, with most developed countries predicting a shortage of nuclear medicine specialists over the next 20 years.

What is the work/life balance like?

Several doctors who are currently working in nuclear medicine have successfully taken time out.

One specialist commented that the impact has been considerably less than that experienced by colleagues in surgery or general internal medicine.

What are the disadvantages of nuclear medicine?

Although the growth areas in modern medicine have been the diagnostic specialties, these have been squeezed by cost containment in the health sector of successive governments. It is frustrating to see developments in other parts of the world that are not being implemented in New Zealand. Another issue for nuclear medicine is that it has proved relatively easy for radiologists to obtain radioisotope licences.

Any comments on the current training?

Nuclear medicine is not developed enough in New Zealand to have its own specialist training scheme so it is recommended that you do some training overseas.