

Working as a neurologist

“There is no better time to train in neurology. Neurology is an intellectually stimulating specialty that combines clinical acumen, communication skills and technology. In New Zealand there is a growing shortage of neurologists, and the number of patients with neurological disorders will exponentially increase as the population ages.

I chose to train in neurology because it is the most interesting medical specialty and one that is heavily reliant on clinical acumen. The other appealing aspect of neurology is the very broad range of conditions and the detective work that is sometimes required to make the diagnosis of rare and fascinating neurological disorders.

Neurology is often viewed as a difficult specialty dominated by dry academics, where treatment options are limited – this is a complete fallacy. Neurology is a rapidly evolving specialty, where many advancements are being made in our understanding of how the nervous system works and the disorders that arise when it fails. This has led to the development of new diagnostic techniques and therapies, which is exciting for us to offer to our patients and to see the difference it makes to them.

The ability to deal with uncertainty is an important trait of neurologists. There can be uncertainty about the diagnosis or the management and patience is required. Frequently there are no readily available algorithms that we can refer to. Other helpful traits include a close attention to detail and the ability to think methodically. Excellent communication skills are essential. A mildly obsessive personality trait can be helpful too!

Neurology training consists of two years of core and one year of non-core training. Trainees are strongly encouraged to gain overseas experience in the non-core year and the years immediately following their training, particularly within a subspecialty that appeals to them. Anyone who is interested in neurology training is encouraged to talk to current trainees and spend some time in the department. A neurology rotation is essential to experience the breadth and depth of the specialty, as well the day to day challenges that arise from a rapidly evolving specialty”.

Dr Benson Chen, Neurology Registrar
Auckland District Health Board

New Zealand neurologists talk about the reality of working within this field

Why did you choose neurology and what do you like most?

Neurology is a rapidly developing branch of medicine that still relies on traditional clinical skills and offers the chance to encounter a wide variety of conditions.

What strengths and abilities make a good neurologist?

Excellent clinical skills are essential. You should possess a keen interest in people and their personalities and behaviour, and be prepared to manage patients with chronic disability and those with severe acute illnesses. You need to have close attention to detail and be a bit of a perfectionist.

As a specialist, can you describe a typical day?

At Auckland Hospital, full time neurologists work 8.00am to 6.00pm five days a week and share responsibility for after-hours call (usually one week in every eight or nine). Nine half-days a week are spent in clinical practice. The work allocation varies from month to month but generally includes outpatient clinics (general neurology and subspecialty clinics), neurology day ward, management of inpatients on the neurology ward, inpatient consultations on other wards and clinical neurophysiology. The remaining half-day each week is set aside for CME activities.

What do you think are the future challenges of neurology?

Currently in New Zealand there are only limited resources available to manage patients with neurological diseases.

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

One neurologist said that he would encourage suitable candidates who are interested in neurology to pursue this career path because there is a national shortage of specialists.

What are future opportunities in neurology?

Plenty of opportunities exist in New Zealand. There is a shortage of neurologists in many centres and there are very few trainees in neurology at present. It is likely that the scope of neurological practice will increase in the next few years with the expansion of subspecialty areas (for e.g. the development of dedicated stroke units).

What is the work/life balance like?

It is possible to take time out, but this should be carefully planned so that you manage to acquire necessary breadth and depth of clinical experience in the early stages of your career. Trainees should plan to spend at least two years of training overseas to expand clinical experience and knowledge, and to develop skills in subspecialty branches of neurology.

After-hours work does not involve heavy obligations so neurology does not impact significantly on family life. A greater level of after-hours work may be required in the near future with the potential development of acute stroke management, although this commitment is unlikely to be onerous.

What are the disadvantages of neurology?

Remuneration is not as good as for other branches of internal medicine that have procedural components.

Any comments on the current training?

Neurology trainees are strongly encouraged to complete a proportion of their advanced training overseas. Most trainees spend the first two years of advanced training in New Zealand (either two years in Auckland or one year in each of two other centres) and then complete their training overseas.