

Working as a sexual health specialist

New Zealand sexual health specialists talk about the reality of working within this field

Why did you choose sexual health medicine and what do you like most?

Sexual health medicine is challenging, interesting and very rewarding. The work usually involves young adults who are otherwise healthy and in most cases it is possible to make a tangible difference to patients' lives. Since sexual health is a developing area of medicine there are excellent opportunities for research.

What strengths and abilities make a good sexual health specialist?

You need to be open-minded and have a sense of humour. Communication skills are vital in this specialty since patient interactions are usually quite intense and demanding.

As a specialist, can you describe a typical day?

A typical day for a full-time specialist involves up to seven clinics sessions and about three non-clinical sessions. Clinics involve consultations with patients presenting with a wide range of conditions and some specialist run subspecialty clinics for specific areas of sexual health medicine. Non-clinical duties typically involve administration related to patient care, teaching and research.

What do you think are the future challenges of sexual health medicine?

Problems with government funding mean that sexual health medicine is undervalued and under resourced. There is poor workforce development and the specialty has not achieved the full recognition and respect it deserves from medical peers and the public.

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

Before starting training, it would be helpful to gain some experience in general practice, family planning and O&G.

What are future opportunities in sexual health medicine?

Consultant positions are scarce in New Zealand, although Australia does offer a greater number of opportunities and the situation in New Zealand should improve over the next few years.

What is the work/life balance like?

It is relatively straightforward to take time out during training and as a consultant. Overseas work during training is encouraged and registrars are able to attend courses and conferences internationally.

The hours for registrars and consultants are very reasonable. During the week you might expect to work from 9.00am until 5.00pm with occasional late nights. There is no weekend or overnight on-call requirement. It is common to have clinics for 7/10 of the week, allowing time to complete paperwork.

Any comments on the current training?

Specialists said that the training programme is excellent - it is well structured with a high standard of teaching, and the level of consultant input is substantial.