

Working as a general surgeon

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

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

There is a strong intellectual element to surgery and many people find the diagnostic aspect appealing and challenging. As a surgeon you are able to acquire skills in performing technical procedures and interventions, and apply these to improve the health of your patients. In many cases it is possible to effect cure, so the end result of this type of medical practice can be extremely fulfilling.

What strengths and abilities make a good general surgeon?

You need to enjoy work that involves restoring and repairing and you should be good at the technical and procedural aspects of medical practice. It is important to be able to work well as part of a team.

As a specialist, can you describe a typical day?

For a general surgeon, a typical week might include two days in the operating room, one or two days seeing inpatients and outpatients and one day of administration and meetings.

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

The major challenge for surgery in the next decade will be achieving a balance between generalism and focus. Technical advances have led to increasing subspecialisation in this discipline - while this has its advantages, there is greater risk of patients ending up 'in the wrong place.' Surgeons face the demand of keeping up-to-date with training and changes in procedures and techniques, and medico-legal issues may also become more prominent in future.

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

Surgery suits those who prefer longitudinal rather than episodic patient care. You need to be committed to becoming a surgeon and you need to be prepared for a long training period, but overall you should find the endpoint rewarding.

What are future opportunities in general surgery?

There is anticipated to be a shortage of general surgeons over the next 20 years and there will be increased opportunities in all areas of New Zealand. There should be no difficulties in finding jobs in particular sub-specialties or geographic locations.

What is the work/life balance like?

Training should be undertaken full time if possible because the training programme is long. During training it would be possible to work part time, but logistically this would probably involve six

months on then six months off rather than a job share of 2.5 days per week. There is capacity to apply for interrupted or part time training. Trainees are encouraged to travel to gain work experience overseas, and such training will usually be credited as long as prospective approval has been obtained from the College of Surgeons.

Contributors commented that it can be difficult to combine a career in this field with family commitments because the hours of work are long. You may be required to train in one of the smaller centres of New Zealand, which could be disruptive if your family is required to relocate.

What are the disadvantages of the general surgery?

Litigation is becoming an increasing problem and can obviously be extremely damaging to a career and a reputation.

Any comments on the current training?

Overall the SET is a comprehensive programme. Registrars commented that the level of support provided by consultants and senior registrars is usually adequate