

Working in health management

New Zealand doctors working in health management talk about the reality of working within this field

Why did you choose health management and what do you like most?

Even though clinicians are becoming increasingly specialised and sophisticated in treating health problems, it is apparent that the health of many individuals and demographic groups is substantially compromised at times. This may occur because of deficiencies in the planning and delivery of basic health care or in the coordination of specialised treatment services. Some doctors move into health management after working as specialists and discovering that the potential benefits of their specialised knowledge and skills are often not fully realised. Frustration with existing systems or resources may motivate them to do something to improve the situation. Other doctors decide earlier in their careers to pursue this path and undertake training in population health specialties such as public health medicine.

A major appeal of working in health management is the knowledge that improving the systems, support and working environment for colleagues in the medical profession will enable them to provide better health care to people. The 'multiplier effect' of assisting others in this way can often result in much greater gains than may be achieved by the same amount of effort or time devoted to treating individual patients by less efficient means.

What strengths and abilities make a good health manager?

You should possess an interest in complex systems, particularly the interactions and workings of people and organisations. You should be sensitive to the needs and wants of a wide range of parties (including health care and other professionals, patients, advocates and politicians).

The competencies of emotional intelligence such as self-awareness, self-control, an ability to develop rapport, persuasion and an ability to sustain co-operative relationships are vital. You need to be able to encourage and motivate others. Heated situations can occur, so you must also acquire skills to constructively deal with other people's anger.

You need to be able to function well in circumstances of uncertainty and inconsistency and where you lack reliable information, and you must be able to respond to crises and make decisions under time pressure. Many of these decisions will be subject to both political and media scrutiny and it is important to communicate clearly the choices faced and options chosen.

To succeed in health management, you will require courage and you must be prepared to 'dare to be different.'

As a specialist, can you describe a typical day?

Much of a working day involves meetings, usually with individuals or small groups. These meetings are where problems are explored, decisions are made and action is planned and reviewed.

Preparation may involve reading and analysing written papers and data. The more senior your role, the less time you will spend alone in detailed analysis; problem assessment and decision making tend to occur during meetings at senior management level. The predictability of your working day will also depend on your position. Continuous changes in the health infrastructure mean that managers at senior levels frequently have to deal with emergent problems that require them to re-prioritise their daily schedules.

What do you think are the future challenges of health management?

Those who work in health management face the challenge of improving systems and processes. Major gains usually necessitate devising alternative ways rather than implementing better management of current processes. It can be a difficult and delicate task to manage change in a constructive way, although the hierarchical 'command and control' model of health management is gradually giving way to systems based on devolved responsibility in which local solutions to local problems are encouraged and supported.

Those who work in health management are also responsible for making decisions about areas of priority in health care. Such decisions are becoming increasingly challenging, since the technical potential to improve people's health often exceeds the actual capacity to deliver the necessary services. Increasingly, the diverse views of the community and politicians are becoming more influential and the medico-legal and ethical considerations are becoming more complex. Decisions and solutions must work in practice, balancing multiple viewpoints and aspirations with the constraints of funding, resource limitation and acceptability.

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

You should obtain broad experience of health systems, both micro systems within organisations and macro systems in different areas of the health sector in New Zealand and overseas. Such experience will provide invaluable opportunities to learn about different systems and to assess their effectiveness. Your initial years of medical experience can be gained in a range of specialties but it is advantageous to seek specialist qualification and experience.

Many practitioners in New Zealand have entered health management after spending ten years or more in another specialty. Specific training programmes in health management are becoming more widely available and in future it may be possible to undertake such training early in your career. However the experience of working in a clinical specialty or in primary care will always afford unique insights into the ways in which health systems and health professionals work.

Experience in health management can begin as soon as you have the responsibility or the opportunity. Registrars for example, need to learn the skills of prioritising, delegating, supervising and coordinating in relation to their ward teams, and these skills might usefully be applied later in management roles. If you are interested in health management you should seek involvement in projects such as audits, which always consider issues of how services might be more efficiently or effectively delivered. Reading or taking courses on management and leadership will increase your awareness of the dynamics of systems and interpersonal relationships and assist you to make your own critical observations. Above all you will have to like dealing with people and 'people issues' because many of the issues which arise relate to interpersonal or inter-disciplinary conflict.

What are future opportunities in health management?

The opportunities for doctors who are interested in health management are extensive. Medical training and experience are advantageous, and if you are willing to learn the disciplines and skills of health management you will be well placed to take up health management responsibilities at various levels in the health system.

At present there are relatively few New Zealand doctors involved primarily in health management. There are many opportunities overseas and more will arise in New Zealand over the next ten years or so with increasing recognition of health management as a legitimate and rewarding career option for doctors.

What is the work/life balance like?

Travel enables you to gain valuable experience. There are job opportunities in other countries and health management skills are relatively transferable, especially for short-term projects. Communication skills are essential to work in health management, so overseas opportunities may be somewhat limited by your ability to converse readily in the local language. The training for health management is flexible and there is no difficulty in being away from New Zealand for a period of time. Similarly, taking parental leave or working part time while looking after children is relatively easy to arrange. Indeed, caring for children can hone skills that are valuable in a career in health management.

Although it need not necessarily have this effect on family life, health management can be quite intrusive. At more senior levels you may not easily find a colleague to cover your after-hours responsibilities in the way that colleagues assist each other in clinical specialties. The problems of health management are often complex so it is harder to 'switch off' when you go home. There is also a tendency for health management in New Zealand to be very crisis-driven, so there are often tight deadlines to meet and problems that emerge unexpectedly and require urgent attention.

Key skills that you must learn if you are to succeed in health management include time management, the ability to share problems with others and the ability to listen to others. One health manager said that unfortunately some practitioners take rather longer to learn these skills than others, not least because 'workaholism' is endemic to (and often glorified in) the medical profession.

What are the disadvantages of health management?

Practice in health management includes dealing with poor performance. Sometimes this needs you to address quite difficult issues with other doctors who may not react well to criticism of their professional work. Those who work in health management roles are often involved in hard decisions that involve rejecting good ideas because of competing priorities or limitations in funding or resources. It can be particularly difficult to communicate decisions to colleagues who are unwilling or unable to accept the associated reasons. Frustration and disappointment often provoke angry responses and you may bear the brunt of these.

Unfortunately health management as a career option for doctors has had little respect within the medical profession in the past and has been rather poorly developed in New Zealand in comparison with many other countries. This is rapidly changing, although at present there are relatively few role

models and there is no clearly defined career path (this is not necessarily a disadvantage but some may find the uncertainty disconcerting).

Any comments on the current training?

There are many routes into a career in health management. No specific qualifications are required at present so the training is very flexible and can be adapted to your individual needs. Many doctors who are currently involved in health management roles in New Zealand have no formal management training. This is far from ideal and in future it is likely that training in the skills and discipline of management will be required, although there will probably continue to be a range of ways of obtaining this training.

Formal programmes that are currently available in New Zealand include the Medical Administration training programme (see the relevant chapter for further information) and the following courses that are offered by various universities:

- Master of Business Administration.
- Master of Public Health.
- Master of Public Policy.
- Diploma of Business.

There are also many short courses in health management run by institutions that include the University of Auckland, Massey University and the Clinical Leaders Association of New Zealand (CLANZ).