

Working in intensive care medicine

New Zealand intensive care specialists talk about the reality of working within this field

Why did you choose intensive care medicine and what do you like most?

Intensive care is a young, growing discipline and its role is still being established so there is opportunity to be involved in actively determining its course. It is a challenging and varied specialty and its 'hands-on' nature suits people who like procedures. You deal with a wide variety of patients and are able to develop and make use of non-medical skills such as counselling. Strong team spirit exists among colleagues, and opportunities are afforded to interact with specialists in many other areas of medicine. It is also possible to practise part time intensive care medicine, so the rest of one's time is spent doing another specialty (e.g. anaesthesia) or non-clinical work (e.g. directing an ambulance service, research and hospital quality management). The generalist medical abilities and communication skills necessary for intensive care medicine definitely assist in these other jobs.

What strengths and abilities make a good intensive care specialist?

You need to have excellent general clinical skills with meticulous attention to detail. Good knowledge across broad areas of medicine and surgery is important, as is the ability to plan and to see the 'big picture'. You need to have stamina, confidence and the ability to think on your feet. Communication skills are essential during difficult resuscitation episodes and also when interacting with the patient and their relatives and friends. You must be able to work effectively with other specialists as part of a team involved in the patient's care since a significant degree of liaison is required with anaesthetists, surgeons and physicians. A level of technical skill is also essential for procedures such as intubation and inserting vascular lines.

As a specialist, can you describe a typical day?

There is a mixture of clinical work, research, training and administration. On the clinical side you make frequent ward rounds, attend family meetings, supervise registrars and are directly involved in work in the ICU. Every day is different.

What do you think are the future challenges of intensive care medicine?

There are huge clinical challenges regarding what should be done and what can be done. Supply and demand problems regularly affect the quality of patient care in this specialty.

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

Although it is recommended that you try out the specialty as a house officer, very few such runs are available and most people can only experience intensive care as a registrar. All of the specialists and trainees surveyed would choose this specialty again, citing it as a very rewarding discipline. However, they suggest that you think it through extremely carefully as the hours can be long and the role is demanding. Working in emergency situations is a regular part of the job - the specialty is not

for the fainthearted. It is best to maintain interests outside medicine so that you can disengage yourself from work during time off.

What are future opportunities in intensive care medicine?

The opportunities seem good since there are few trainees currently working in this area and many leave for Australia after qualifying. A greater number of intensive care specialists will be needed in the future.

What is the work/life balance like?

Travelling as an intensive care specialist is easy, particularly if you are involved in the academic aspects of the discipline. There are at least nine women currently practising in New Zealand, but the specialty is said to be no better or worse than most with regard to part time work or arranging maternity leave.

Intensive care medicine is particularly demanding on family life during the training period as the hours can be long and you must be available for on-call responsibilities.

Any comments on the current training?

It is possible to combine intensive care with anaesthesia or general medicine or emergency medicine as a dual training programme. Almost all New Zealand intensive care specialists have another specialty qualification, usually in anaesthesia.