

Working as a neurosurgeon

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

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

This specialty is extremely interesting and offers great intellectual, technological and practical challenges. It can be a difficult (and at times stressful) area in which to work but it is extremely rewarding. Cases involve serious pathology and require knowledge of a range of signs and symptoms and strong clinical medicine skills. The surgery is technically demanding and has potential to make a significant difference to a patient's life.

What strengths and abilities make a good neurosurgeon?

You must be able to concentrate for extended periods of time and be willing to work long hours. It is important to remain calm in emergency situations. The specialty also involves dealing with and treating patients who are seriously ill - good communication skills are essential since breaking bad news is an integral component of the job

As a specialist, can you describe a typical day?

A hospital-based specialist would usually conduct ten-hour long operating sessions twice a week and eight-hour long clinics twice a week as well. Daily ward rounds that commence at 7.30am and CME and administrative activities account for the rest of your time.

What do you think are the future challenges of neurosurgery?

Computers are often employed in current surgical procedures and advances in technology will continue to change the face of treatment options in this specialty. Other challenges include achieving lower morbidity rates, making improvements in cerebral protection and developing new techniques for treating intrinsic tumours.

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

It would be advisable to spend some time in a neurosurgical unit if you are interested in pursuing specialist training in this area. Registrars recommend that you should talk to consultants (as they tend to be very approachable) and try out the neurosurgery house surgeon position.

What are future opportunities in neurosurgery?

Around the world there are significant opportunities for top neurosurgeons. Opportunities within New Zealand are seen as being relatively good. Entry into the specialist surgical training program, which is an Australasian program, is competitive.

What is the work/life balance like?

In common with all major surgical specialties, neurosurgery is said to be very demanding on time. Specialists agreed that it would be difficult to take time out to have children during training. After completion of training arrangements are possible to allow for time out and would need to be negotiated with the particular employer.

Neurosurgery does take up a significant proportion of your time and you may need to sacrifice outside interests in order to maintain your family life. Neurosurgeons need to be prepared to spend long hours at work.

What are the disadvantages of neurosurgery?

Neurosurgery is a physically demanding specialty. Procedures are long and mentally tiring and there is a reasonable amount of after-hours call work, especially for trauma cases. It can be distressing when patients fare badly in spite of optimum treatment.

Any comments on the current training?

It is recommended that trainees gain plenty of experience in ORL, plastic surgery and general surgery before embarking on the specialist training program. At least some of the training program must be completed in Australia.