

Working as a pain specialist

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

Why did you choose pain medicine and what do you like most?

The rapid expansion of basic and clinical scientific knowledge has made this an exciting field of work. National and international meetings for pain medicine often involve up to fifty basic science and clinical disciplines and provide rich opportunities for learning outside of your primary specialty area. Collaborative discussions regarding the diagnosis and management of patients tend to be rewarding and intellectually stimulating.

What strengths and abilities make a good pain medicine specialist?

If you wish to pursue a career in this field you must be able to empathise with patients who have become debilitated due to severe pain. You should also have a keen interest in working as part of a team.

As a specialist, can you describe a typical day?

The daily schedule usually involves outpatient consulting, inpatient consulting and multidisciplinary team meetings. It can also involve considerable procedural work.

What do you think are the future challenges of pain medicine?

The basic and clinical science content of pain medicine is extremely broad and currently represents one of the most rapidly expanding areas of the neurosciences. Since knowledge in this specialty is advancing swiftly, many specialists spend a significant amount of their time in clinical or basic research. Specialist involvement in undergraduate and postgraduate teaching is also essential in order to bridge the knowledge gap that currently exists.

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

A career in pain medicine will broaden your clinical horizons and invite you to keep pace with advances in basic science and sociology. It provides an enjoyable opportunity to interact with colleagues who are committed to improving patient care, and enables you to develop research activities and contribute to undergraduate, postgraduate and continuing education programs.

What are future opportunities in pain medicine?

This field is extremely diverse: specialists are required to be knowledgeable about the management of challenging pain problems in paediatric, adult and geriatric patients across almost every field of specialty. Since this is a relatively new field, specialists are highly sought-after.

What is the work/life balance like?

The Faculty considers part time training and interrupted training on an individual basis.

There is a significant amount of on-call work, particularly for those who are involved in acute pain management. Those who are predominantly involved in chronic pain are also called upon to provide after-hours services.

What are the disadvantages of the pain medicine?

Some patients with long standing chronic pain have become depressed and demoralised. This may initially pose a challenge for you to establish rapport and can be very demanding, although the training program does provide assistance and advice in this respect.

Any comments on the current training?

Training in pain medicine is a supplementary specialist degree. It would be highly desirable to seek a rotation in a multidisciplinary pain centre before you make a final decision about pursuing this specialty. Some training centres now provide the opportunity for interns and residents to be attached to the training program.