

# Working as a palliative medicine specialist

## New Zealand palliative medicine specialists talk about the reality of working within this field

### **Why did you choose palliative medicine and what do you like most?**

Acute medical care is limited in nature and is sometimes unable to address the broad needs of very ill and dying patients. Palliative medicine offers a holistic approach to care and expertise in symptom control that might not otherwise be available. A palliative care team is often able to help patients rekindle hope at a difficult stage of their lives, assisting them to recognise choices that are available and to find the best way forward in situations that are often changing rapidly. Work in palliative medicine is very rewarding.

### **What strengths and abilities make a good palliative medicine specialist?**

An ability to function within a team and work alongside other health care professionals is important. Enthusiasm for teaching is valuable, since the teaching of health professionals (both formally and informally) is inherent to the job. It is important that you should have good clinical skills for assessment and diagnosis, and a range of medical and life experience. Interpersonal, communication and listening skills are vital, and you need to feel confident about addressing and negotiating difficult ethical issues that you might encounter. To make a career in this field sustainable you need to be able to seek appropriate personal support and make self-care a priority.

### **As a specialist, can you describe a typical day?**

A daily schedule varies depending on whether you work in an acute hospital or in a community setting. The majority of specialist palliative care posts at present are community based within hospice services that may or may not have inpatient beds. As a specialist you may provide medical support for hospice inpatients, community palliative care nurses, general practitioners, and patients in day-stay or clinic settings. Many of the main cancer centres have dedicated hospital palliative care teams. As a member of one of these teams you would expect to work consultatively with palliative care nurse specialists, primarily in the acute setting.

### **What do you think are the future challenges of palliative medicine?**

Palliative medicine has only recently been established as a subspecialty, with vocational recognition by the New Zealand Medical Council in 2001, supporting two ways to speciality training, namely the Australasian Chapter of Palliative Medicine and RACP-Palliative Care programmes. There is currently a shortage of palliative medicine specialists both in New Zealand and internationally.

Major challenges that face palliative medicine include integrating more closely with mainstream medicine without losing the broad approach to care or becoming merely a specialty of symptomatologists - becoming more involved with teaching at pre- and postgraduate levels for a wide range of health professionals, securing funding for essential palliative medicines not readily

available at present and providing palliative care to disadvantaged dying patients such as those with non-malignant illness and those in residential care.

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

You should talk with those who are actively involved in palliative medicine and work with them if possible. Further information can be found in the RACP handbook Requirements for Physician Training (Adult Medicine, New Zealand) and in the Palliative Medicine Training Manual published by the Australasian Chapter of Palliative Medicine.

**What are future opportunities in palliative medicine?**

New Zealand is following the trend set in Europe and Australia, with growing recognition that specialist palliative care can improve choices and quality of life for people with malignant or non-malignant incurable illness. The New Zealand Palliative Care Strategy Document made palliative care an area of priority, although it is not yet apparent whether there will be sufficient funding to enable significant development of services. It is likely that there will be an increase in job opportunities over time.

**What is the work/life balance like?**

Taking time out from work in palliative medicine is feasible as is part time work in both hospital and community settings. There are also good opportunities to gain experience and training overseas.

Palliative medicine may have moderately demanding out-of-hours commitments but offers good opportunities for part time or job-share arrangements.

**What are the disadvantages of palliative medicine?**

The work is intense and the field is under resourced so there is risk of burn-out if you are not able to set reasonable boundaries and look after yourself adequately.

**Any comments on the current training?**

Several centres are in the process of investigating issues related to funding and training and training posts are being established in some centres in New Zealand.