

Working in medical administration

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

Why did you choose medical administration and what do you like most?

An interest in medical administration is predicated on a desire to make a difference to the way the health system is run. It can be extremely rewarding to establish new organisational systems and to make decisions that improve the operation of health services.

You also gain insight into vastly different perspectives as you observe and encounter the attitudes and stances that non-clinicians have towards the health service. The best part is that you can have more of an impact on the community than in an individual situation.

What strengths and abilities make a good medical administration specialist?

Medical administration requires you to act as a link between non-clinician management and doctors, so you need to be aware of the similarities and differences in their respective approaches. This requires comprehensive insight into political pressures, economic constraints and a broad range of other considerations. It is also helpful to possess an understanding of the ways in which organisations function. The workload in this area of specialty is often heavy so you should be able to prioritise and work efficiently. Good interpersonal skills are essential - you will need to negotiate, build relationships and encourage people to work well together, and you must be able to remain calm and composed in heated situations. There are occasions when you have to make tough decisions, so confidence is important. You need to be able to combine both your clinical expertise with knowledge about running a business.

As a specialist, can you describe a typical day?

A typical day would involve a significant amount of office-based work. Expect to attend numerous meetings and to liaise with staff members, external agencies and the media. There is minimal or no patient contact.

What do you think are the future challenges of medical administration?

Since late 2001, medical administration has been recognised as a separate specialty by the New Zealand Medical Council for vocational registration. While the Fellowship of the Royal Australian (now Australasian) College of Medical Administrators (FRACMA) has been recognised as a specialist qualification in Australia since 1980, it is still relatively new in this country. The training programme has been well established in Australia and is now being progressively adapted to suit New Zealand conditions and needs.

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

The College requires you to have spent a minimum of three years working in a clinical setting so that you have a level of understanding of clinical perspectives. If you move into medical administration it would be worthwhile maintaining your clinical skills, perhaps by working one day each week as a clinician. Many New Zealand universities offer complying Masters programmes. It is important that you contact the Chair of the College's New Zealand Board of Studies (Dr David Rankin) to discuss a proposed course of training. You will also need to enrol as a candidate with the College formally if you wish to work towards Fellowship.

What are future opportunities in medical administration?

Medical administration is a new and growing discipline so the outlook is encouraging. New Zealand is still some way behind Australia and the United States in terms of the status of the field, but is rapidly catching up.

What is the work/life balance like?

It should be no more difficult to take time out than in any other area of specialty.

One specialist said that it is relatively easy to impose limits on your job in order to spend time with your family and pursue other interests.

What are the disadvantages of medical administration?

It can be frustrating to experience conflict between management and medical roles, and to be unable to exercise clinical skills acquired through years of medical training.

Any comments on the current training?

As one of the pioneers in the training programme in New Zealand, you will have the opportunity to work with the College to steer the New Zealand training programme in the right direction.