

# The Royal Australasian College of Physicians: The Trainee Physician Journey



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The Royal Australasian College of Physicians (the RACP) trains, supports and sets standards for a wide range of specialties in Adult Medicine and Paediatrics & Child Health, including cardiology, medical oncology, respiratory medicine, and over 30 other programs.

With a membership of almost 23,000 the RACP is the largest medical college in Australasia. This includes 15,000 Fellows and 7,500 trainee physicians (frequently known as specialists).

Physician training in Adult Medicine or Paediatrics & Child Health generally includes three years of Basic Training (including the Written Examination and Clinical Examination), and three or more years of Advanced Training.

## BASIC TRAINING

Over the 36 month basic training program trainees have the opportunity to train in one of 26 medical specialties in Adult Medicine or Paediatrics & Child Health. Basic training involves:

- completing rotations with a range of hospitals and health services
- building on clinical knowledge and skills gained through completing a medical degree, and
- work-based assessments to monitor progress and obtain feedback

Basic Trainees sit both a written and clinical exam towards the end of Basic Training. Passing both examinations is required in order to progress to Advanced Training.

## ADVANCED TRAINING IN ADULT MEDICINE OR PAEDIATRICS & CHILD HEALTH

Building on the knowledge and skills gained through previous specialist training, Advanced Trainees complete their training in one of 33 diverse medical specialties.

The RACP offers seven Fellowships:

- FRACP (Adult Medicine or Paediatrics & Child Health)
- FAFPHM (Public Health Medicine)
- FAFRM (Rehabilitation Medicine)
- FAFOEM (Occupational & Environmental Medicine)
- FACHPM (Palliative Medicine)
- FACHAM (Addiction Medicine)
- FACHSHM (Sexual Health Medicine)

Successful completion of the advanced training program results in accreditation to work as a physician in Australia or New Zealand, and Fellowship of the RACP (or one of its Faculties or Chapters).

## TRAINEE PHYSICIANS' JOURNEY

Dr Annika Sjoeholm is a Paediatric registrar at Dunedin Public Hospital and recently sat her written and clinical exams, which completed her basic training with the RACP. She first became interested in Paediatrics as a 5th year medical student. "For quite some time I thought I wanted to do obstetrics, but gradually I realised I was much more interested in newborn resuscitation and care of the neonate than the delivery itself.

"As a trainee intern I undertook my medical elective in a specialist Paediatric department in the Middle East, which gave me the opportunity to interact with children with some quite rare and complex conditions. Though I couldn't speak their language, I found that children have a universal language through play and this helped us to communicate."

After several rotations through adult medicine as a house officer, Dr Sjoeholm knew she was interested in pursuing a more medically oriented career (as opposed to surgery or general practice) and found the choice between training in adult medicine versus paediatrics difficult.

"I was sold on paediatrics after spending six months as a paediatric house officer in a fun and positive children's ward in Dunedin. Obviously it helps that I like children too, which is a fundamental prerequisite for becoming a paediatrician."

For Dr Sjoeholm paediatrics offers variety – everything from preterm infants weighing less than 1 kg, to the adolescent with diabetes transitioning to adult services. "Every on-call shift is so varied – we may be called to an emergency delivery, be involved in a helicopter retrieval, or simply be there to reassure a family and give advice."

She says it's hugely satisfying to be able to support a sick child and their family through an illness "To gain the child's trust to let you examine them – even if it means examining their teddy bear's heart first – to admit them to the ward for treatment along with their worried parents, and then to see them leave once they are well again."

Sometimes students will tell Dr Sjoeholm that they couldn't work with children as 'it's too scary,' or 'kids get sick and it'd be too sad,' or 'I couldn't deal with the parents.'

"I'd say that a lot of students and doctors working in other specialties shy away from paediatrics for these reasons, however, like any area of medicine it becomes easier with experience. It's well worth learning some basics

even if you don't envision yourself becoming a paediatrician as unwell children are everywhere – in GP clinics, in ED, perhaps even on the same airplane as you. I still remember a child collapsing on the adult medical ward I was working on as a first year house officer!"

Preparing for the RACP exams and working as a doctor at the same time was a challenge. Dr Sjoeholm began studying for the written examination a year in advance, averaging 20 hours of study each week. If she were to do it over again Dr Sjoeholm would try to take more time out, building time into her study plan to go for a run, read a non-medical book or just sit in the garden.

"At the time you are so worried about failing that exam revision can become all-consuming. I'm grateful to have passed first time, but I can appreciate now that I'm no longer in the thick of it that passing or failing an exam doesn't define you as a person or a doctor."

Dr Sjoeholm's top tips for managing basic training are:

- take opportunities (courses, committees, research projects etc) as they arise – but don't overload yourself
- have a mentor – find a trusted consultant that you look up to and who can give you advice
- take time out – try to create a good work/life balance for yourself (you can't be expected to care for others if you don't care for yourself also)

At medical school Dr Sjoeholm completed an intercalated BMedSci(Hons) degree and, with a keen interest in clinical genetics as a sub-specialty, she plans to undertake a PhD in the near future. "Clinical genetics is a rapidly evolving area of medicine; for example, the Human Genome Project was only completed 13 years ago, and yet we now have readily accessible genome-sequencing technology as a clinical tool in general paediatrics clinics."

Dr Sjoeholm is keen to stay involved in research within the Paediatrics department. "I firmly believe that medical research is a worthwhile endeavour, as it drives evidence-based medicine and ultimately improves the care of our patients."

Dr Tom Wang is in his first year of Advanced Training with the RACP. He has chosen to specialise in cardiology and is currently a Registrar at North Shore Hospital. Dr Wang says he was attracted to cardiology in particular for multiple reasons: "Cardiovascular disease is the number one cause for mortality around the world and the most frequently encountered medical presentation to hospitals."

"The scope within cardiology is broad, from acute inpatient emergencies to outpatient management, procedures to radiology, young adult congenital and rheumatic heart disease patients to elderly/palliative settings, and from clinical to academic development. It is the pinnacle of evidence-based medicine with the widest range of established and effective therapies that improve patient outcomes, making it a very rewarding specialty."

"Cardiology advanced training in the Auckland region is of high quality and excitement with excellent teachers, colleagues and teams. There is a focus on acquiring procedural skill sets, as well as the clinical management of inpatients and outpatients. I also enjoy being up to date with the latest scientific literature, and opportunities to undertake research and attend conferences".

Looking back on his training Dr Wang says he has not encountered many unexpected challenges and there is not much that he would change. "Choose registrar runs that are not overwhelmingly busy when sitting your exams. For the written exams, the RACP online lectures are a good starting point, along with reading plenty of up to date textbooks and top medical journals."

"Study groups are very useful, particularly for reviewing and practising with past questions, and to motivate each other, stay on track and 'push forward', which is especially beneficial in the last couple of months. Setting a plan with goal dates for studying different topics is also a good idea."

Dr Wang's top tips for managing the transition from pre-vocational training to specialist training are:

- decide earlier rather than later which subspecialty interests you as a career; then 'go all out for it' – research is important whichever way you go
- prepare for exams early
- find the balance between working and other aspects of life – work can at times involve long hard hours and be stressful and demotivating, so 'decompression time' and 'escape strategies' are needed

As the 2015 RACP Trainee Research Award of Excellence recipient, Dr Wang aims to continue following his passion for research throughout his career; working with hospitals, universities, local and international doctors, and researchers within this field "I'm heavily involved in research and am always undertaking multiple projects at any one time".

Looking forward, Dr Wang has his next five years mapped out. He is planning to undertake a cardiology clinical Fellowship overseas after completing his training at the end of 2018, then return to New Zealand to practise as a cardiology consultant, ideally alongside a university appointment, within the Auckland region.





## SUPPORT FOR TRAINEES

The RACP offers a support pathway to assist trainees who may be having difficulties meeting and completing their training requirements. The pathway, and its supporting resources, aims to help trainees and supervisors to navigate, address, and overcome difficulties at an early stage. Access to support services, including counselling services, medical services and support for regional and remote trainees, is also offered.

Reflecting a progressive outlook, the RACP understands the evolving needs of trainees throughout their training journey. Flexible training options are available to trainees who are unable to train on a full-time continuous basis, including:

- part-time training, and
- interruptions to training (for example, to take parental leave or volunteer overseas)

The RACP also hosts an annual “Trainees Day” event offering professional development, practical wisdom, and peer networking, which sees roughly one tenth of all NZ physician trainees attend each year.

## FUTURE OF PHYSICIAN TRAINING

In response to global changes in postgraduate medical education, the modernisation of health care delivery, and the evolving nature of physician practice, the RACP is currently renewing the design and delivery of its education programs. This will include changes to selection into training, training curricula, and support services.

With a focus on aligning the RACP’s training curricula with the reality of clinical practice, training will shift away from being predominantly

time-based to having a greater emphasis on the assessment of competence in clinical practice.

A new standards framework that integrates medical expertise and professional competencies, aligned with an evolving view of physicians and their practice, will identify the ten essential domains of professional practice that trainees will be expected to develop competency in.

The RACP has recently developed a selection into training policy, with a key underlying principle of embracing diversity. Increasing the indigenous physician workforce – towards achieving population parity – is a priority for the RACP.

## BEYOND TRAINING

There are countless ways members can engage with the RACP, both while still in training and beyond, including opportunities to influence the RACP’s governance, advocate for colleagues, the community and consumers, and embrace innovations in training and practise.

The RACP’s annual Trainees’ Day, the New Zealand Trainees’ Committee, and social media channels provide opportunities for trainees to connect with the RACP and with each other, through the RACP.

The RACP Foundation – the philanthropic arm of the RACP – awards grants, scholarships, and fellowships, to encourage world class research and support the education and training of current and future physicians.

Attaining Fellowship does not signal the end of a physician’s training; the RACP offers continuing professional development, supervisor development workshops, podcasts and e-learning resources.