Musings on an unexpected stint as a paediatric trainee in Invercargill

By Nathanael Lucas

‘Rural towns must do better to attract long term rural doctors’ is just one media headline indicating New Zealand’s worrying rural doctor shortage. This was playing in my head as I drove from Invercargill up State Highway 1 to my new home in Christchurch. I was reflecting on the past six months of my life as a rural doctor due to a number of unintended circumstances. Six months of growth, six months of learning, six months of challenge and six months that have without question made me a better doctor.

Being an Auckland graduate, I didn’t know what to expect in Southland, other than knowing who the Invercargill Mayor was, that the polytechnic had zero fees and there is a really good netball team (the Southern Steel). In fact, I knew very little about Southland.

At Southland Hospital I received excellent senior medical officer support, encouragement of my development, and a gratefulness from patients that only experience can describe. Yes, I was pushed and yes, I was sometimes out of my comfort zone but I always felt supported. I found my consultants easily approachable, engaging, and willing to teach. So, if the experience is so great why are these hospitals understaffed?
I’m a second-year basic trainee in paediatrics and have now worked in three centres in paediatric departments; Wellington, Invercargill, and Christchurch (just started), and enjoyed them all. However, I would encourage any budding paediatrician to try and spend some trainee time in a smaller centre.

Both the paediatric training programme and New Zealand’s medical schools have put an emphasis on rural training to help try and curb the lack of doctors in smaller centres. New Zealand’s medical schools have rural initiatives and rural entry into medical school. Both medical schools have 5th year programmes allowing students to spend a year in a rural environment. These placements can be in Northland, Taranaki, Whakatane for Auckland Students, and Queenstown, Grey-mouth, Blenheim, Nelson, Dannevirke or Masterton for Otago students. Colleagues I talked to who were in these programmes said the time they spent as part of the programme was the most enjoyable and for many did entice them to work in the rural locations.

Likewise, the Paediatric FRACP makes advanced trainees spend a year in a ‘rural’ setting; which from talking to senior colleagues is a beneficial part of training. However, this can prove disruptive with trainees often settled in a centre by the time it comes around. It needs to be balanced with training in a bigger centre as it is important trainees get adequate experience in subspeciality paediatrics and Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) over their training period.

So... should paediatric trainees spend six months as a basic trainee in rural locations as well? Surgeons have to move almost every year so maybe paediatric trainees should do the same. There are drawbacks to this as often we have families and commitments to certain centres and you want doctors committed to the community and wanting to work in their community. I don’t know the answer, but what I do know...
is that as a recent graduate, one of the big reasons I hadn’t considered a regional rural placement was whether I would get a job back in a big centre. However, if a scheme existed where all urban trainees did a six-month run in a rural centre as a paediatric senior house officer/junior paediatric registrar it would give junior doctors a ‘taster’ to see if this could be a feasible long-term option, without the risk of losing their job in their desired urban location.

In conclusion, we have a rural doctor shortage in New Zealand and paediatrics is not immune to this. I would have never expected to have spent six months in Invercargill after graduating at the Aotea Centre in Auckland a few years ago. I don’t know the way forward but I think we should be having conversations related to time in a rural centre before the shortage gets even worse.

About Nathanael Lucas

Nathanael Lucas is a Paediatric Basic Trainee Based in Christchurch. Prior to his current role he completed two years as a house officer in the wider Wellington Region including three months at Wairarapa DHB and six months as a Paediatric Senior House Officer at Southland Hospital, Invercargill.