I love cooking. Food is at the sociocultural core of communities, and creating food that delights the senses alongside nourishing the body is one of my favourite pastimes. Think about your favourite type of kai – what do you love about it? The smell, texture, way it makes you feel, health benefits?

Two main arms of cooking are evident to me: nutrition and taste.

Nutrition feeds and sustains our bodies. Our intricate inner workings rely on good nutrition for healthy function. As doctors we more often see the results of poor nutrition in our practice.

Taste brings pleasure to the experience of eating. It is the smell, texture, flavour, and context in which we eat that makes it part of our culture – bringing together families, friends, communities.

For example, when making soup I might consider which vegetables to add alongside creating the flavour with spices. Without flavour, the soup may be nutritious and fill our bellies, but would also be bland. Furthermore, poor choice of spices could make it unpalatable.

Have you ever tried raw kale? Disgusting, yet a ‘superfood’. However, seasoned well, kale might make for a beautiful experience of consumption while adding to bodily nourishment.
This article isn’t about food. It’s about kindness.

The above analogy will hopefully illustrate the importance of being a doctor that is kind.

If cooking is analogous to the way we practice medicine, then nutrition is our scientific knowledge, clinical reasoning and diagnostic skills, procedural skills, and ability to make sound plans managing acute medical or surgical problems.

These are the micro and macronutrients we include when metaphorically ‘feeding’ our patients. These are critical to managing disease and promoting healing in those we care for. Without good nutrition, health will not be optimal.

If cooking is analogous to the way we practice medicine, then taste is our empathy, body language, way of communicating, the words we choose, how we choose to work in the team, our actions outside of completing clinical tasks, and our kindness.

These are the smell, texture, flavour, pleasure, satisfaction of the meal we offer when feeding our patients and interacting with colleagues. With ample nutrition but without good taste, healthy relationships will not be optimal.

Kindness is about the way we work as doctors, and is a concept I have been thinking about for years. I’ve considered what being a kind person means, and more recently what being a kind doctor means.

On first impression, kindness may seem soft, cushy. It’s just about ‘being a nice person’ isn’t it?

No. It’s not the same as niceness. Someone once told me that nice is passive, whereas kind is active. Kindness is consciously acting on our nice or generous thoughts and intentionally choosing to show people our genuine care. Nice requires minimal effort or expense on us personally, kindness may require personal effort, compromise, or expense. Nice is smiling at your colleague, kind is remembering their name. Nice is talking to mates over lunch about what a great review your colleague did for a patient, kind is telling and encouraging them directly.

A kind doctor looks like this to me:

- Deciding to voice positive or encouraging thoughts to those concerned
- Taking a genuine interest in others lives outside the immediate clinical problem or working relationship
- Helping others where it might be inconvenient for yourself
- Making a conscious effort to remember and pronounce names well
- Being present with patients during consults, hearing their priorities and acting on their concerns
- Finding common ground and building connection with patients and colleagues
In the business of our clinical work we consciously think and focus on what we are doing (nutrition), yet do we think as often about how we do what we do (taste)?

Kindness is the smell, flavour and texture of your perfect steak, or to me as a vegetarian, your chickpea curry – not the protein particles it contains.

Kindness in action will alter the course of our clinical practice. It strengthens our relationships with colleagues, patients, and whānau. It could even be the antidote to bitter tastes like cynicism, bullying, harsh criticism, rudeness, and insecurity.

Ultimately my personal job satisfaction is greatly enhanced by choosing to be kind. I would encourage us to be skilled chefs in creating delicious food for the guests of our hospitals, and our co-workers.