

Career spotlight: The diverse opportunities in general practice

GPs play a crucial role in the Australian healthcare system. Their role on the frontline is never more evident as the world comes to terms with the impact of COVID-19. However, general practice is often a career path initially overlooked by medical students and junior doctors as they begin training in the hospital system, exposed to hospital specialties. In this new series, we are introducing you to a range of GPs, highlighting the diverse and rewarding career possibilities.



Dr Michael Baker
Procedural GP, Gippsland

Why did you choose to become a GP?

Country General Practice appealed to me. The variety in the work, living in a rural setting, the outdoors close by and no commuting.

How would you summarise your career path in medicine and the influences on your choices?

Take opportunities.

At first, I planned to go work in Africa. Six weeks in Kenya as a medical student was an incredible experience but I realised I was not going to change things there on my own. Country Victoria needed doctors so I set my sights on that. I did two years of hospital RMO work, then a year at the Royal Children's Hospital, including three months at a suburban general practice. I liked paediatrics, but you can see a lot of paediatrics in general practice. I came home from work one day and my wife, home on maternity leave after the birth on our first child, showed me an ad in the AMA magazine for a 12 month GP registrar position in Busselton WA, "For the lover of sun, surf and sail". We were both keen on

the beach, surf and snorkelling, so off we went with our eight-month-old son.

It was amazing to work with Dr Kevin Cullen, a GP legend. He certainly taught me that you did not have to be in awe of your specialist colleagues. All of the local GPs gave me great support and I really appreciated this on two occasions in particular when I felt out of my depth when patients presented unconscious to the emergency department. As our house in Melbourne was still being rented out, we then went to the UK and I did a 12-month anaesthetics post. Baby number two was born while we were there. By the end of that, administering anaesthetics and dealing with unconscious patients were not as scary as I thought!

Back in Australia, I found an obstetrics diploma job waiting for me. Then a GP post in Maffra literally landed on my doorstep. We settled in Maffra and are still here 27 years later! The first 10 years was full procedural general practice with obstetrics and anaesthetics. Things changed and I became the 'ex-procedural GP' but that gave me time to be increasingly involved in medical education, especially GP registrars.

Continued on page 15

A few years ago the kids (the third was born in Maffra) had finished tertiary education and I had the opportunity to return to procedural practice by undertaking an advanced obstetrics diploma. Dr David Simon, an O&G at Warragul (now in Darwin) and a champion of GP obstetrics gave me great encouragement. The idea was to go on and do some remote work. That turned out to be more remote than I thought, a six-month volunteer post in the Solomon Islands helping teach junior doctors in Honiara. I had undertaken short-term volunteer work in the Pacific and after my experience in Africa I had decided that teaching doctors was the way to make a difference. The Solomon Islands post seemed to bring together so much of my medical experience.

I'm back in home in Maffra now, doing GP obstetrics work in Gippsland and

have just commenced a part-time medical educator role. I might stay put for a while as our first grandchild is due shortly!

What do you love most about being a GP?

You really can make a difference to patients' lives. Placing a coronary artery stent is an amazing skill, but managing that patient through their depression, helping them off cigarettes, getting them to take their medication and perhaps even starting some exercise is, I think, the biggest challenge with the biggest rewards. And you can see that firsthand and be part of it over years and decades.

What would you change or do differently if you had the opportunity?

Well I always wonder what life would have been like if I had done marine science instead of medicine!

What advice would you offer to other doctors in navigating their career as a GP?

Have an idea of what you like and think about why you like it, but keep an open mind. I had never planned to practice anaesthetics but found I really enjoyed it. GP training seems to get more complicated with more rules but if you have an idea of where you are headed you can make it work for you. Learn from mistakes and criticism rather than being frightened off by them. Have confidence in your ability.

If you are interested in sharing your story as part of this series, or would like to book an appointment for careers advice, please contact the AMA Victoria Medical Career Service on careersadvisor@amavic.com.au or (03) 9280 8722.