Radiation therapy uses radiation to treat disease. Most patients receiving radiation therapy are cancer patients. It’s a highly skilled profession and, because cancer affects so many people, qualified radiation therapists are in demand.

A degree in radiation therapy is a great choice. It combines a variety of learning from health science to technology to patient care to teamwork.

It is taught from the Wellington campus of the University of Otago, next to Wellington Hospital. Students go on clinical placements at cancer centres around the country.

“I’ve always had a passion to work in healthcare, and an interest in technology, so naturally my attention was drawn to radiation therapy. I’m in the fortunate position whereby I can leave work daily, with the personal satisfaction knowing that I’ve made a difference for not only my patients, but for their whanau and friends.”

James Sandison (BRT, PGCertHealSc)
Why study Radiation Therapy?
You will be working in a fast-paced high-tech environment which also involves patient care. You will play a vital part in the treatment of cancer and learn about this disease which touches most families at some time. Due to the lengthy nature of cancer treatment, five days a week for up to seven weeks, you’ll get to know the patients and their whānau well, which is very rewarding.

Excellent communication skills are required as you will be providing a high level of care and support throughout each patient’s course of treatment.

You will be working in a field that is globally at the forefront of research and technology development. This ensures you will keep up-to-date with new ways of treating cancer.

It is also offers good opportunity for work/life balance as working hours are typically within a normal working day.

What does a Radiation Therapist do?
As a radiation therapist, you are the person within a specialised healthcare team who plans a patient’s radiation treatment using computer technology and clinical information. You are also the person who delivers the radiation therapy, using a range of high-tech treatment options, and who supports the patient during their course of treatment.

Careers in Radiation Therapy
A career in Radiation Therapy offers excellent career opportunities both in New Zealand and overseas. Radiation oncology departments in New Zealand are at six public hospitals (Auckland, Waikato, Palmerston North, Wellington, Christchurch, and Dunedin), and four private centres (Auckland, Tauranga, Wellington and Christchurch).

As a qualified radiation therapist you may have the opportunity to specialise in the area of treatment delivery, planning, research and development or clinical education. On qualification, Otago Bachelor of Radiation Therapy graduates are eligible for registration with the New Zealand Medical Radiation Technologists Board, so your employment prospects are immediate.

Radiation Therapy is an international profession and New Zealand educated radiation therapists are highly regarded overseas for their excellent level of skills and broad knowledge of the field.

What background is required?
There are a number of ways that you can enter the programme; we take students straight after Year 13 at college as well as those who have done one or more years of university study, already have a degree or are looking for a career change. Look on our website for the entry requirements of each category.

Personal attributes of empathy, attention to detail, adaptability, and excellent communication skills are required.

Admission to the programme
We welcome applications from those interested in this great career choice. Admission involves consideration of your academic ability and your suitability to the profession, as demonstrated at an interview. Selection for interview is based on academic performance and interviews are held in October each year.

Applicants who are of Maori or indigenous Pacific descent may request this to be taken into account as part of their application.

Department visit and careers presentation
To help you see what is involved in the profession, we highly recommend that all applicants attend one of our career information sessions/department visits. These are held at radiation oncology departments around New Zealand between June – September each year and are a great opportunity to see first-hand what this career is all about.

The timetable for visits will be available on the Department website as details are confirmed. See otago.ac.nz/radiationtherapy

What does the programme involve?
The programme is based at the Wellington campus of University of Otago. The class size is limited to about 30 students, so entry to the programme is competitive. The programme is full-time and takes three years of study to complete. In addition to the academic papers, there is a large component of clinical work within the degree, particularly in the second and third year where half the time is based in clinical placements. Students are usually placed at a different radiation oncology department in Year 2 and Year 3, to give a range of clinical experience.

Postgraduate study
There are options of completing an honours thesis and/or postgraduate papers in radiation therapy advanced practice. These can lead to a postgraduate certificate, diploma, master’s degree, and Doctor of Philosophy qualifications.

PROFILE

James Sandison
(BRT, PGCertHealSc)
Radiation Therapy Graduate

While studying Health Sciences First Year at the University of Otago's Dunedin campus, James Sandison attended an introductory seminar about Radiation Therapy (RT) after noticing the subject's slogan 'technology meets caring'.

“I’ve always had a passion to work in healthcare, and an interest in technology, so naturally my attention was drawn,” he says.

After researching more about Otago's Radiation Therapy programme, James realised it was the right choice for him. The following year he moved to Wellington to study RT.

“I’ve had plenty of opportunities to gain hands-on experience with patients in a supportive environment, which ultimately enabled me to go through the transition of putting the academic concepts learnt in the classroom, into practice,” he says.

“The RT programme also provided me an opportunity to socially meet fellow students throughout the Wellington campus, and build relationships and bonds which last well beyond the completion of the degree.”

Soon after finishing his studies, James gained employment as a New Graduate Radiation Therapist at Auckland City Hospital. After an initial six-month contract, he was offered permanent employment as a Staff Radiation Therapist.

He’s since gone on to travel to Italy to attend the European Society for Radiotherapy and Oncology International Conference (ESTRO), and completed a Postgraduate Certificate in Health Sciences (PGCertHealSc) endorsed in Radiation Therapy Advanced Practice to develop both clinically and academically.

Reflecting on how his life's changed since attending that seminar in Dunedin, James also points out his newfound attention to detail. “Due to the nature of radiation, we work to millimetre accuracy in all that we do, so it’s pivotal to have an eye for detail. Now in my out-of-work life I am conscious of things being spot-on accurate – which has all developed since training and working”.

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