

Research Profile

Senior Fulbright Scholar Enjoys Slice of Kiwi Life

Aside from the stunning scenery, the great people he's working with and being part of New Zealand's number one University, the other big impression Senior Fulbright Scholar Dr Tom Egnew has of Dunedin is pizza toppings he would never have dreamed of.

While that part is a slight exaggeration, he is genuinely enthusiastic about the opportunities he has had during his time on the staff at the Department of General Practice in the Dunedin School of Medicine.

Dr Egnew's six-month scholarship will end in mid-July but the Behavioural Science Coordinator from Tacoma – 38 miles south of Seattle in the state of Washington – has spent much of his time here heavily involved in helping evaluate the curriculum for teaching doctor/patient relationships.

Back home he works in a community-based, university-affiliated family medicine residency programme, Tacoma Family Medicine, run by MultiCare Health Systems, a private, non-profit health organisation. It has strong links with the University of Washington School of Medicine's Department of Family Medicine where he also holds the title of Clinical Professor.

Tacoma Family Medicine has 24 residents in a three-year training programme under its wing at any one time. The organisation also runs a one-year fellowship in rural medicine that emphasises operative obstetrics.

"They need to be able to do things like C-sections, because out in the boonies you don't have many obstetricians around," says Dr Egnew.

Tacoma Family Medicine's mission is to train people for underserved services, he explains.

"In the United States, that means the inner city, low income clinic systems or, by definition, anywhere rural."

Dr Egnew says clinical appointments such as his are one of the ways the University of Washington recognises the educational contribution of people employed from outside the academic system.

"It means I'm not in the publish or perish track people with tenure face. But my appointment is reviewed each year," he adds.

His position as a salaried employee of MultiCare meant there was no provision for a sabbatical, however the Fulbright Scholarship provided him with an alternative.



Senior Fulbright Scholar Dr Tom Egnew is visiting the Dunedin School of Medicine as part of his research on General Practice.

Although unsuccessful with his first application, Dr Egnew succeeded with his second, creating an opportunity to further his work in medical communication and doctor/patient relationships.

"I needed to go to an English speaking country to be able to teach the nuances that go with that form of education."

A look at the Department of General Practice's website here soon revealed their interest in patient-centred communication, an area in which Dr Egnew had been involved in developing curriculum for the University of Washington.

"There was a synergy between the interests of this department and my own interests. I wanted to be able to develop my own concepts as well as provide something useful to the department."

He and Dr Hamish Wilson have been examining what is and is not being taught in doctor/patient relationships by surveying fourth, fifth and sixth year students on clinical attachment. They have also interviewed faculty at all three clinical schools and held focus groups at each of the clinical schools.

Dr Egnew has also been tutoring second-year students on the Patient, Doctor and Society thread, as well as

working in the Masters of General Practice programme.

One of the many things he has enjoyed about his OE (Otago Experience) is being able to see doctors at different stages of their training and development, and being able to talk to them about their experiences.

"Professionally, it has been an extremely rewarding and stimulating experience. Being able to step back from my normal pace of work and reflect has been really fruitful," he says.

"The people I have been working with have been top notch – bright, enthusiastic, knowledgeable and inquisitive."

It has also been an enriching experience for his family. Partner Dr Joan Halley has been working at Dunedin's Urgent Doctors and their two children, aged five and 10 have been enjoying school here.

An added bonus has been the distinction of being able to live on Baldwin Street – the steepest street in the world.

It will make for great stories when they head home next month – along with the tales of the scenery, and the venison and cranberry pizzas.