



remarks

Take a Break If you're frustrated with medical practice in the U.S., one physician suggests an overseas locum tenens assignment. It might include tea and toast.

BY NELSON C. GOLDMAN, MD

Are you tired of HMOs, pre-certification and denial of insurance claims? Would you like the practice of medicine to be fun again? It can be. Go somewhere where you can practice without all of the hassles and hurdles of the insurance companies. Do a locum tenens in another country. I did. Now I have a new attitude; my batteries are recharged. It may be the medicine you need to enjoy practicing again.

When I started to practice in 1970, health maintenance organizations did not exist, there was no managed care, office overhead was manageable, and liability premiums were low. The other otolaryngologists in town were friends and colleagues, not competitors. After



Dr. Goldman with his daughter, Amy, at Hawke's Bay, New Zealand.

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25 years of practicing solo, I sold my practice to a younger man and went to work for him. Things just didn't work out, so after a few years I started thinking about a change.

I had picked up the habit of reading the classified ads in

JAMA. One day a small ad caught my eye. It was for psychiatrists to work in Australia and New Zealand. Even though I was not a psychiatrist, it was a toll-free phone number, so I had nothing to lose. The people at [Global Medical Staffing](#) in-

formed me that they had never been approached for an otolaryngologist, but to send in my CV anyway just in case the need arose.

Six months later, with only a few weeks left on my contract, I was trying to decide what to do with myself when I received a phone call. Would I accept a six-month locum tenens assignment in Hawke's Bay, New Zealand? Sure, why not. Could I be there next month? Certainly!

I had never been to that part of the world and knew next to nothing about it. I searched the Internet on New Zealand in general and Hawke's Bay in particular. I read everything the library had on New Zealand and cleaned out the travel section of the local bookstore. Global Medical made the paperwork

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easy and arranged a telephone interview with the chiefs of surgery and ENT. Five weeks after the phone call, I was flying across the Pacific to Hawke's Bay.

New Zealand is composed of a north island and a south island. The land mass is about the same size as Colorado. The population of New Zealand is almost four million with 75 percent of the people being of European ancestry or "Pakeha" and 25 percent being Maori or of other Pacific island extraction. In addition, there are millions and millions of sheep. Even though it is a small country, each area has its own distinct personality. Common to all of New Zealand is its stunning beauty and laid-back lifestyle. Hawke's Bay is on the eastern shore of the north island.

The two main cities on the Bay are Hastings, which is an agricultural center, and Napier, which is more tourist oriented and has a major port. Each city has a population of around 50,000. The city of Napier was completely destroyed by an earthquake in 1931 and was completely rebuilt in the art deco style. Each year residents hold an art deco weekend (that lasts all week) and draws celebrants from all over New Zealand and Australia. Hawke's Bay is the major fruit-growing area of New Zealand and is famous for its wines. There are 28 wineries in the Bay area, each with its own charming cafe.

For six months I was to be a full-time otolaryngologist-head/neck surgeon for Health Care Hawke's Bay, the referral center for the province within the public system. The chief of ENT was part time and had a private practice as well. The waiting list for surgery was up to a year and a half. Help was needed. One of my major responsibilities, I was informed, was to shorten the waiting list. I would operate one full day and two half days a week.

The hospital was located in Hastings and the operating suite had been completely remodeled the year before. The

facilities and equipment were modern and up to date. I was a little unfamiliar with some of the British instruments, but luckily I had brought some of my favorites from home. Anesthesia was superb. I had the same scrub and circulating nurses for six months. Our ability to operate as a team kept getting better and better. Our operating time kept getting shorter and shorter. The time between cases was three to four minutes. It is the most well managed, efficient operating room I have ever seen.

It was heaven in the O.R., but everything stopped for morning tea. Afternoon tea was not a big deal, but around 10:15 in the morning, it was time to go to the break room for tea and toast. Often someone would "shout" or host morning tea, bringing baked goods or fresh fruit for everyone. Birthdays were a feast! I was reluctant at first, but I finally got used to the idea of five meals a day.

When I was not in surgery, I would hold clinics either in the hospital or the health center in Napier, 20 minutes away. One day a month I would fly to Wairoa for clinic. This was fun since I could observe the beautiful scenery from a small plane at low altitude. Between patients there, I watched the cows grazing in the pasture next door.

In the clinic, the only forms I had to fill out were for X-rays and lab tests. Dictation was on my desk the next day. To schedule surgery, all I had to do was obtain informed consent. The patients on the schedule were excited to have surgery because they had been on the waiting list for such a long time. For emergencies or to expedite a case, all that was needed was a phone call.

All was not routine ENT. There were some challenging cases and some pathology I had never seen before. Once I had to take advantage of the air ambulance service to one of the teaching hospitals in

Auckland. The hospital has two helicopters and one fixed wing aircraft at its disposal 24 hours a day.

During my stay, the hospital provided me with living accommodations, an automobile, and liability coverage in addition to an adequate salary. My little house was a three-minute walk from the hospital grounds. This was good because I never felt comfortable driving on the left side of the street. There was one each of apple, orange, apricot, nectarine, and figuoa trees in my yard. In the mornings I would go outside and pick my breakfast. My cooking skills improved after I took a Moroccan cooking course in the evening community education program. My ironing skills improved because the only relatively expensive thing in Hawke's Bay was laundry and dry cleaning. I preferred to spend my money in one of the many excellent restaurants in Napier.

Due to my change in eating habits, I increased my exercise program accordingly. I walked everywhere. It was a pleasure just to walk down the streets of town and notice the lack of billboards for attorneys advertising to sue doctors and nursing homes. I went to the gym a block from the house and played squash regularly. There are four squash clubs in the Bay area as well as four golf courses. The New Zealand symphony, ballet, and opera each make a visit to Hawke's Bay on their circuits around the country.

On weekends when I was not on call, I would go "tramping" or hiking with the Heretaunga (the Maori word for Hastings) tramping club. It took several months of training before I could keep up with the ladies on a tramp. I took my two-week vacation time when two of my grown children came to visit. We made our own circuit around both islands by plane, train, bus, and boat and on foot. Sharing the natural beauty of this awesome country with my family was the highlight of my

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stay. When the six months finally came to an end, I stayed an extra month and traveled more in New Zealand and Australia.

I had never worked so hard, accomplished so much, and had such a wonderful time doing it. I had worked and played with delightful people in a beautiful land without the frustrations of practice in the United States in today's environment. The policies of the insurance companies seem comical, but I'm refreshed and ready to go back into practice and play their silly games.

Why go back into practice you may ask? Why not just do another locums? Ironically, it is because I cannot get an individual health-insurance policy. I'm too young for Medicare and too old to be attractive to a private insurance company. So I'll go back to work and get a group plan from the office.

I'm sure it will be only a short period of time before I start reading the classifieds again looking for another locums. The opportunities are there and I'm looking forward to doing it again. If you want to feel needed, enjoy the practice of medicine, travel, and experience another culture, think about doing a locum tenens outside the United States. It's good therapy and it will put a smile on your face every time you think about it!

Nelson Goldman, MD is once again practicing otolaryngology in Jacksonville Beach, Florida.

He began his new private practice in July with a new lease on medicine.

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