

What is an anaesthetist?

A specialist anaesthetist is a fully qualified medical doctor who, after obtaining their medical degree, has spent at least two years working in the hospital system before completing a further five years of training in anaesthesia.

Clinical anaesthesia is built on the knowledge of physiology (how the body works) and pharmacology (how medications work in the body).

Anaesthetists have an extensive knowledge of medicine and surgery and understanding of the basic sciences. They know how the body responds to anaesthesia and surgery, and how a patient's health affects these responses.

In Australia and New Zealand, anaesthesia training is supervised and accredited by the Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists (ANZCA).

The training to become a specialist anaesthetist is equal in length to that of other medical specialists, such as surgeons, and includes intensive assessments, both at the hospitals where trainees work, and by written and verbal examinations. Doctors in the training program are called registrars.

When a registrar completes their training and passes all examinations, they are awarded a diploma of fellowship of ANZCA, become Fellows of the College and may use the initials FANZCA after their name. They can then practise as a specialist anaesthetist in Australia and New Zealand.

Anaesthetists are perioperative physicians trained in all forms of anaesthesia and are members of multidisciplinary teams providing healthcare to patients. They assess patients before their procedures and play an important role in caring for the patient before, during and after surgery. They also provide anaesthetic care for patients undergoing non-surgical procedures, particularly if the procedures are long, complex or painful.

Anaesthetists play a pivotal role in resuscitating acutely unwell patients, including trauma victims, and help to manage patients suffering from acute or chronic pain. They also provide pain relief for women during labour and delivery.

Throughout their practice, anaesthetists must continue to update their skills by regularly attending professional development sessions. Anaesthetists must participate in a continuing professional development (CPD) program that complies with ANZCA's CPD standard in order for them to practise.

Many anaesthetists are active in research, studying how the body works, and developing new drugs and equipment to minimise error and patient harm. They teach a range of healthcare workers, including medical and nursing students, interns, residents, anaesthesia trainees and other medical specialists.

In some remote or rural communities where the workload is not sufficient to support a full-time specialist, non-specialist doctors may give anaesthetics. These doctors undergo limited training sufficient to provide anaesthesia for healthy patients undergoing less complex operations.

Non-specialist anaesthetists often also work as family or general practitioners and undertake training to meet the requirements of the Joint Consultative Committee on Anaesthesia. This is a tripartite committee with representatives from ANZCA, the Royal Australian College of General Practice (National Rural Faculty) and the Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine.