



A DIFFERENT ROLE: Robin Kelly, who joined the Taupō Medical Centre last year, is a physician associate, a new medical role being introduced to New Zealand from the United States.

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Associate role new to New Zealand

Laurilee McMichael

It's the job you've probably never heard of, but local GPs are hoping it will help patients by taking the pressure off waiting times.

Californian Robin Kelly, who joined the Taupō Medical Centre's staff in September, is a physician associate — a medical position that's new to New Zealand but which has been an established medical career in the United States since the 1960s.

Physician associate roles first came into being after the Vietnam War when trained medics returning home found there was no opportunity for them to use their skills in the existing medical framework. From that, the qualification of physician assistant, now becoming known as physician associate, developed. Physician associates work in every medical specialty across the US.

Robin, 35, has a degree in Spanish and international studies and then trained as a physician associate, studying the two-year programme which combines classroom work, lectures and clinical placements.

She works independently, but is supervised by a doctor. She sees all sorts of medical cases, from wounds to mental health, and patients with chronic conditions such as diabetes or heart disease. Anything outside her scope is referred to a GP.

She says while physician

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Robin Kelly

associate is relatively well-known in the US, it's unknown to most New Zealanders and can be hard to explain.

"I think the best way to look at it is just a different role," she says. "I like to think of myself as a physician extender so I don't have all that knowledge that they [doctors] have, but I can do some of the same things they can so it takes the pressure off them and they can see their more complicated cases."

Robin has been a physician associate for six years and enjoys her role. She has worked in a variety of settings, from primary care to urgent care and cardio-thoracic surgery. She saw an online posting about a New Zealand physician associate pilot project and liked the sound of it. The project will introduce the role in this country and also bring in regulations for physician associates to work under, including the ability to eventually sign their own prescriptions and sign WINZ and ACC forms.

After nearly five months in Taupō Robin says although many patients still assume she's a doctor, she's settling in well.

"Everyone here has been really supportive and I feel like people have adopted the role pretty easily."

"I feel the patients get the care that they need and they leave happy and knowing that they've received quality care but I think some patients are probably surprised by it."

She's been homesick at times, but the transition has been made easier by the local environment.

"I think people have almost treated me like family so it feels like a home and it feels very comfortable. It's a quiet town but it's so beautiful, there's so much to do here. I did the half Ironman and the Tarawera 100km, I did the cycle challenge and the Waikaremoana trail. There's plenty more to see though, I feel like I've hardly touched it."

Taupō Medical Centre director Glen Davies says the physician associate project is a Midlands Health Network initiative which has recruited six physician associates from the United States and placed them into general practices in its network.

He says Robin's arrival coincided with the retirement of Dr Fran Meuli and increasing patient demand, so it had been good to have Robin working in a locum role under the supervision of the doctors, which gave the centre two locums and six GPs. The centre is also using its nurses in more innovative ways to help provide better patient care and spread the work load.