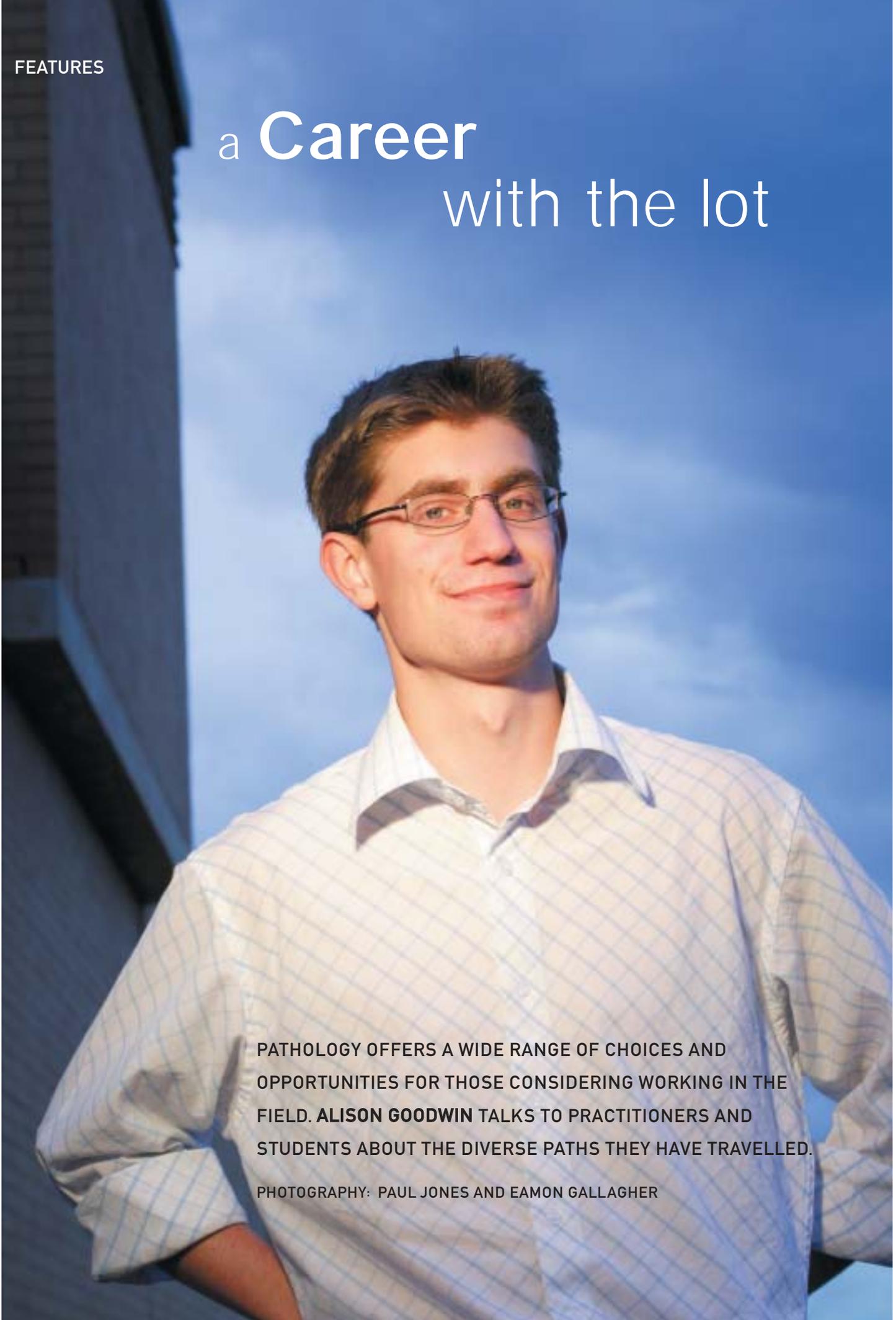


# a Career with the lot



PATHOLOGY OFFERS A WIDE RANGE OF CHOICES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THOSE CONSIDERING WORKING IN THE FIELD. ALISON GOODWIN TALKS TO PRACTITIONERS AND STUDENTS ABOUT THE DIVERSE PATHS THEY HAVE TRAVELLED.

PHOTOGRAPHY: PAUL JONES AND EAMON GALLAGHER

Pathology seeks answers to medical questions. But the big question for some medical students is: where do I go from here? Finding a satisfying career path is an embarkation into uncharted waters.

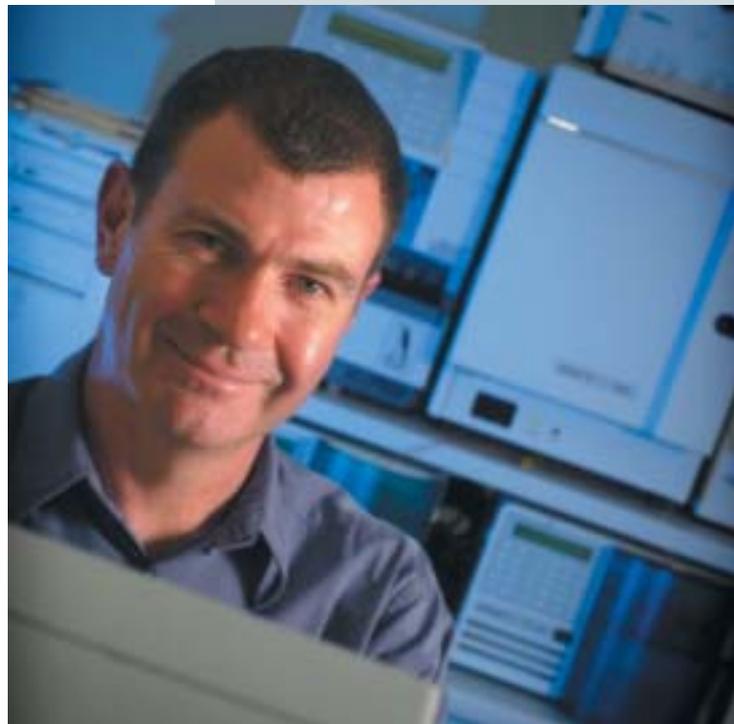
Five practitioners and two pathology students, each in a different stage of their careers, share their journey of self-discovery. While their career paths have not always been clear-cut, all agree their choice of pathology was the right one and has led to many positive experiences.

**T**hird-year medical student **Jeremy Brown** is captivated by pathology's problem-solving capabilities. "I have always enjoyed solving puzzles and pathology is a chance to solve puzzles for a career," says the 21-year-old, who is studying at Melbourne's Monash University medical school at the Alfred Hospital.

"By gathering clues from the patient's clinical history and presentation and then the macroscopic, microscopic and specialist investigations a specimen may undergo, a pathologist gathers evidence to eventually, and hopefully, make a definitive pronouncement as to the cause of a patient's disease or the success of a treatment. Pathology as a subject appeals to me because it gives me an opportunity to really understand the causes of disease and how the body responds."

Jeremy lists microbiology and its use in treatment of infectious diseases as a current favourite area of study. "In pathology, I was lucky to have as my first tutor Dr John Pedersen, an anatomical pathologist at the Alfred Hospital in Melbourne who showed that pathology could be fun, interesting and relevant. My current tutor, Dr Kate Stewart, herself currently training to be an anatomical pathologist has also been very helpful in introducing me to some of the aspects of pathology that not every student gets to see."

Pragmatically, he notes that pathology offers a doctor what approaches regular working hours and the opportunity to develop academic skills. On the downside, he dislikes early mornings, breaking bad news and "seeing people who have given up hope, which is definitely not the same thing as people who have accepted a terminal diagnosis".



*Left: Jeremy Brown  
Above Michael Buckley*

Of studying pathology, he says: "Give it a go, see an autopsy if you can find one and if you think you'd rather be on the table than go back to one of them, maybe pathology isn't for you. On the other hand, you might really enjoy the process of discovery that is what an autopsy is all about."

An attraction to the scientific side of medicine and the chance to conduct research led Adelaide intern **Nathan Harvey** to pathology. Nathan, 30, was recently selected to undergo a traineeship at South Australia's Institute of Medical and Veterinary Science.

He is soon to complete a PhD in stem cell biology, a task he began after finishing his intern year. As well, he works part-time in the Royal Adelaide Hospital's emergency department.

Encouragement from his PhD supervisors, Joy and Peter Rathjen, and a meeting two years ago with Associate Professor Deon Venter of Melbourne University helped Nathan clarify his pathology choice.

Some of the pathology disciplines, such as haematology, seem geared towards physician trainees who have passed their FRACP exams; Nathan says prospective students should check with individual pathologists in their local laboratories to find out what their requirements are or check out the RCPA website. (details provided at the end of this article)

**D**r **Michael Buckley** adheres strongly to the philosophy that one must follow one's career inclinations, no matter how uncharted that career path may be. Dr Buckley, 45, is a senior staff specialist directing the genetics laboratories at South Eastern Area Laboratory Services, based at Sydney's Prince of Wales Hospital and is also currently the RCPA Chief Examiner in Genetics. He trained initially in immunopathology and then in genetics, completing his training in 1992.

His advice to prospective pathologists reflects the determination he showed in making his career choice. "Only do what you are interested in. Don't be dissuaded from doing what you most enjoy just because a career path isn't immediately apparent," he says.

At the time Dr Buckley began his pathology studies, there were no training positions as such in molecular genetics. "My genetics 'training' was learnt by extension through a research PhD in molecular biology, immunogenetics and cytogenetics; there is now a formal genetics training program that provides for the systematic education and assessment of pathologists in this field."

Dr Buckley sees in his present role a near-ideal balance of research and patient care. His position allows him to blend patient diagnosis and clinical service with administrative roles in the RCPA and researching genetics.

The publication of the human genome has markedly changed the field of genetics and removed many of the limitations on what can be done, he says. "The only limits are those imposed by one's imagination and funding."

They will still have an ongoing clinical impact because pathology is, and will increasingly be, the basis of modern medicine.



*Dr Ken Sikaris,*

**D**r Ken Sikaris, 46, who runs the Chemical Pathology Department of Melbourne Pathology, a private Victorian laboratory that is a member of the Sonic network, appreciates the importance of keeping open the flow of communication between all areas of health care.

"Collating pathology data and interpreting it in clinical context is a communication skill I have applied to all sectors of health care including GPs and specialists," he says. Dr Sikaris finds helping clinicians make the best use of tests one of the more satisfying aspects of working in a pathology service.

As well as his Melbourne Pathology role, he chairs the Chemical Pathology Advisory Committee that oversees part of the RCPA Quality Assurance Programs. After receiving a science degree, Dr Sikaris wanted to broaden his involvement in applying science to medicine and found clinical biochemistry offered the greatest potential for him.

"I was fortunate to meet Drs Michael Guerin and Peter Dennis early on; both of whom were terrific role models, given their enthusiasm and commitment for the discipline," he says.

"When I started, most large labs had two chemical pathologists and the

younger Fellow could be focused on development. Now it is harder to find time away from routine work and administration for both training and development. But where there is a will there is a way."

Information technology has had an enormous impact on the provision of pathology services and has the potential to allow for still better application of new knowledge in the future, Dr Sikaris says.

"Young pathologists in diagnostic services may lose much of the rewarding aspects of patient contact, but they will still have an ongoing clinical impact because pathology is, and will increasingly be, the basis of modern medicine."

Associate Professor **Jane Dahlstrom** initially thought of a career in general practice, but later PhD studies exposed her to the "interesting mix of medicine – diagnostic work, teaching and research" – that is pathology.

She graduated as a pathologist in 1999 and works in anatomical pathology at The Canberra Hospital. She is an associate professor of anatomical pathology at the Canberra Clinical School, ANU Medical School and University of Sydney. Dr Dahlstrom says pathology training is no harder on family life than any other area of medical specialty training, and actually offers some flexibility of hours and less overtime.

Juggling the workload and the changing needs of six children, who now range in age from eight to 25, has taken good organisational skills, the support of her husband, the hands-on involvement of grandparents and an efficient housekeeper-nanny.

"My difficulties are similar to any working mother. Organising after-school activities for the children is hard. When I was a trainee, I was the soccer coach for one of my sons' teams – we held the weekly practice on the oval outside the pathology laboratory so I could return to complete the surgical cut-up some afternoons."

During her pathology traineeship, Dr Dahlstrom worked full-time and part-time, depending on the needs of her family. Although she now works full time, she says anatomical pathology lends itself well to part-time employment.

"Pathology is at the centre of most clinical decisions about patient management. This can be a challenge, but is also very rewarding," she says. "As a pathologist, I have been able to continue some of my research interests, mainly as collaborative projects with other researchers, and I have developed further my interest in teaching and medical education."



*Associate Professor Jane Dahlstrom*

"Without question pathology is the most interesting branch of medicine – it relates to every facet (of medical science). Every day is a challenge in pathology."

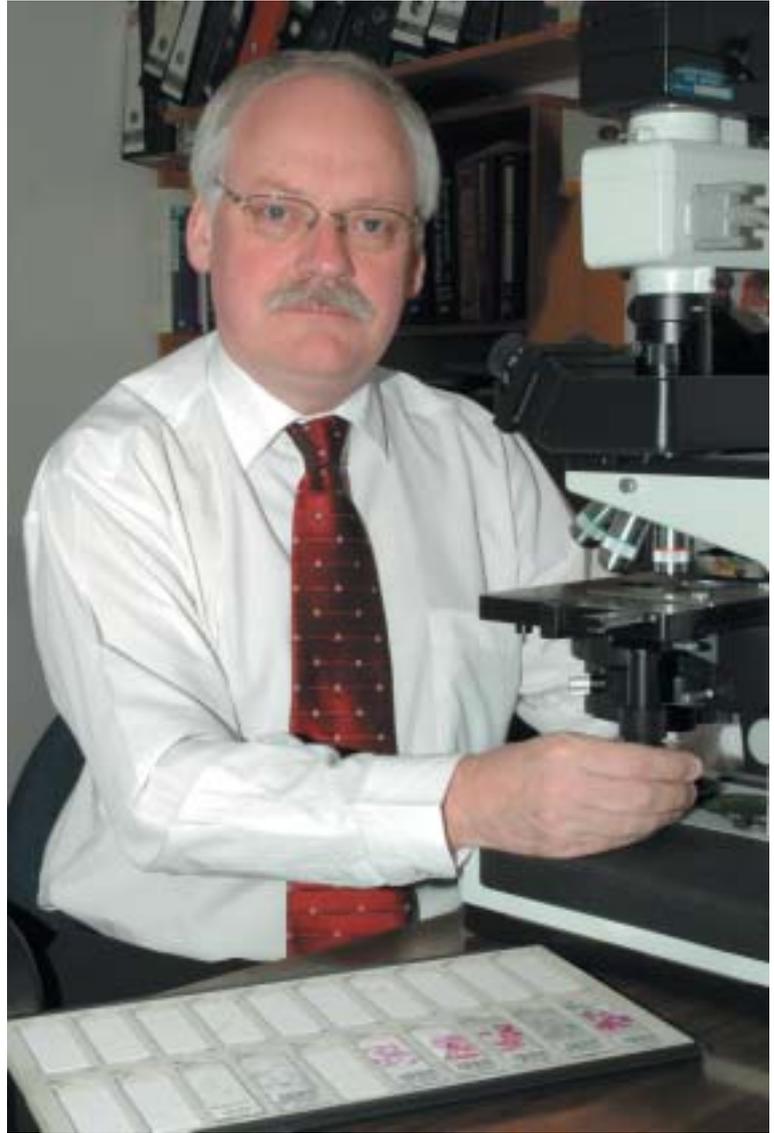


Image supplied by Brett Delahunt

Professor Brett Delahunt

**R**ocks and minerals led Professor **Brett Delahunt** to his life's work. The head of the pathology and molecular medicine department at New Zealand's University of Otago Wellington School of Medicine and Health Sciences sees no incongruity in the switch of allegiance from geology to pathology.

For him, medicine offered a far more secure future than geology. And of medicine's branches, pathology was streets ahead in appeal. After completing a BSc (hons) in geology, he took a new career path.

"The best move I ever made," he says of his switch from surveying the earth's composition to enhancing the health of its human inhabitants. "Without question pathology is the most interesting branch of medicine – it relates to every facet (of medical science). Every day is a challenge

in pathology – we make life-and-death decisions and rely on science to do it."

Professor Delahunt, 54, completed his postgraduate training in anatomical pathology at Wellington Hospital and became a Fellow of the RCPA in 1995, having previously completed his general medical and specialist pathology training.

A specialist in urologic pathology, he was appointed to the staff of the Wellington School of Medicine and Health Sciences in 1980, was promoted to professor and departmental chairman in 1996 and is deputy dean. Today he oversees the training of more than 200 fourth, fifth and sixth-year medical students at what is one of the University of Otago's three clinical schools.

During his career, he has worked with such international agencies as the World Health Organisation and been a visiting

scientist at the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology in Washington.

Professor Delahunt is saddened that fewer candidates are seeking academic careers. He says the workload, which involves completing a doctorate and submitting papers for publication as a prerequisite, should not deter people with talent from entering the academic arena.

"Get involved with your local department before you begin your formal training, understand the different technologies and focus on where you want to go," he says. Summer studentships offer an ideal means of becoming acquainted with the discipline, prospective tutors and colleagues. In fact the RCPA offers scholarships in pathology for medical students for just this purpose. Details are available on the RCPA website.

Few leaders in their field are honoured during their lifetime by their colleagues. **Dr Eva Raik, AM**, has been accorded that special privilege.

The RCPA's Eva Raik Lecture, presented annually by the college, showcases research by leading Australian and international pathologists and is named in honour of a practitioner who has served as honorary secretary of the college, vice-president and its first female president.

Sydney-based Dr Raik has devoted more than 40 years to excellence in her chosen field – haematology. After her graduation from Sydney University in 1959, she spent a year in the professorial Department of Microbiology at St Thomas' Hospital in London before returning to Australia, where she spent 29 years as assistant haematologist and later director of the Kanematsu Memorial Institute at Sydney Hospital.

She is now the head of the haematology and cytogenetic laboratory at the Northern Sydney Area Health Service's Pacific Laboratory Medicine Service.

Haematology was one of four disciplines to be studied when Dr Raik began her pathology training. However, she was one of the first single-discipline graduates with a haematology speciality.

Czechoslovakian-born Dr Raik arrived in Australia in 1948 and credits her adopted country with providing her with the opportunity to pursue her dream of becoming a doctor. In those days, the workload on a young registrar was enormous. Dr Raik recalls having to rise at 4am to be able to find a few precious hours in which to study.



*Dr Eva Raik, AM*

Always fascinated by the study of diseases of the blood, she says the most satisfying aspect of her career has been "the ability to assist with the diagnosis of haematological disorders, be they clotting conditions, malignancies or deficiencies in nutrients, to follow through tests and find pathways to come up with treatments".

"The laboratory is not an ivory tower, nor a retreat from the real world of medicine," she says. "Pathologists who work in laboratories must work with their colleagues to provide optimal management of patients. I have enjoyed my entire working life and have found pathology to be interesting and satisfying as a career pathway" .

For those interested in a career in pathology go to the RCPA website [www.rcpa.edu.au](http://www.rcpa.edu.au).

Then go either to **Careers/Training with Us/A career in pathology or Careers/Trainee with Us/Document Library/Training with RCPA** 📖

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*For medical students interested in pathology scholarships go to [www.rcpa.edu.au/publications/documentlibrary/policiesawards](http://www.rcpa.edu.au/publications/documentlibrary/policiesawards)*

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