South Australian GP
Dr Penny Need’s commitment to general practice was evident even before she was officially undertaking the specialty.
‘I actually applied for general practice training in my internship year because that was what I really wanted to do,’ she told Good Practice.
‘I got married during internship and we drove the Great Ocean Road [in Victoria], and as soon as I got to Melbourne I flew back to Adelaide and did my [general practice] interview, then flew back to my husband and continued on my honeymoon.

‘I was always committed.’

Dr Need’s love of general practice was challenged earlier, however, while she was still a student and was faced with a type of healthcare delivery that did not appeal to her instincts as a practitioner.
‘I did a rotation in general practice at an “undisclosed location” while in medical school which I absolutely hated. It was churn-them-in, churn-them-out, 10-minute medicine,’ she said.
‘It was just not the sort of practice I would want to work in.’

Fortunately, that test proved to be short-lived when Dr Need saw the potential vitality and genuine connections that are possible in general practice.
‘I later went to Angaston, in the Barossa Valley in South Australia, and saw the sort of medicine that I loved,’ she said.
‘Whole-person medicine and comprehensive care, where you can see someone with, say, a sick child with croup and you can admit them to the hospital yourself, institute management, observe them and do the whole thing.
‘That was awesome and that was when I decided, “Yep, general practice is for me”. So after that decision in my sixth year I applied for general practice straight away.’

Streamlined path
While Dr Need’s journey to general practice may have hit a temporary speed bump, her path to studying medicine and becoming a doctor was a bit more simplified.
‘I started medical school when I was 17 years old and went straight through the six years of that,’ she said.
‘I graduated and did my internship at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital and from there I went on to do a year at the Women’s and Children’s Hospital [both in Adelaide]. I was doing paediatrics and obstetrics … and I did a Diploma of Child Health in that year.’

Following stints at a number of different rural and urban general practices in South Australia, Dr Need ended up working as a registrar at Pioneer Medical Centre in the outer north-eastern suburbs of Adelaide. The move to this practice, it turned out, was an important one in Dr Need’s career.
‘I had a fantastic mentor at Pioneer Medical Centre in Dr Peter Ford,’ she said.
‘That was such a great experience.
‘All of [the registrars] really enjoyed our time there and four of us have gone on to purchase the practice from Dr Ford. He still works there, but the four people who were under him as trainees have gone on to buy the practice.
‘We wanted to keep the practice exactly as it was because we loved working there so much. We just loved the way it cared for patients and we wanted to make sure that we could keep it the same.’

The next generation
In addition to clinical work, Dr Need also has a number of roles in medical education.
‘I’ve done a graduate certificate in clinical education because my other passion, in addition to general practice, is the education of doctors,’ she said.
‘I have a role as Director of Clinical Training at Southern Adelaide Local Health Network. I’m based at the Flinders Medical Centre and I have a role that involves supporting interns, RMOs [resident medical officers] and general practice trainees who are in the hospital.
‘It’s really nice to have that sort of general practice presence in a tertiary hospital because, otherwise, the trainees don’t see a lot of general practice.’
Dr Need relishes the opportunity to expose these trainees to the broad and varied nature of general practice. ‘A lot of [the trainees] don’t really understand what general practice can offer,’ she said. ‘When I explain, “If you want to do dermatology in general practice, for example, you can do as much dermatology as you want. If you have a special interest in anything you can basically do that in general practice”.

“They say, “Wow, I didn’t think I’d be able to do these other things that I love and do general practice”.

‘A lot of people then change their track about general practice. They just need that education and that knowledge.’

Dr Need is also quick to point out that working to become a GP is anything but an easy option.

‘I tell junior doctors, “If you’re choosing general practice, you’ve got to do it for the right reasons. Don’t choose it because it’s easy, because it’s not”,’ she said.

Dr Need believes that choosing any medical speciality ‘for the right reasons’ can have lasting effects on a person and their career.

‘I’m also passionate about doctors’ health. It’s a really challenging career no matter what healthcare area you go into, and if our doctors aren’t healthy they’re not going to be providing good care,’ she said. ‘That’s really important because if you’re in an area where you’re not enjoying it and you’re not the right fit, you’re not going to do well.

‘There’s a lot of pressures on doctors and having ways that you can … look after yourself is really important.

‘It’s about caring for the doctor and about, ultimately, caring for the patients.’

All of the work Dr Need does as a practising GP, practice partner and medical educator, and in every other area of her career, comes back to a single principle: quality general practice.

‘It sounds a bit clichéd, but I am passionate about that whole-of-person care, where you care personally,’ she said. ‘Going above and beyond, making calls for referrals, getting patients into the practice in a timely manner. Pushing things a bit further and being a patient advocate.

‘The relationships you form with your patients are really what makes the job such a great thing.’

Mental health skills training with a focus on youth mental health

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I’m a member because ...

I wanted to show my commitment to the general practice and also wanted to access educational opportunities that were relevant to me. I remember also being drawn in by the copies of John Murtagh’s general practice and the Australian medicines handbook (very helpful for a GP trainee).

I have stayed with the RACGP as I appreciate being involved with people who are passionate about general practice. I also enjoy examining and helping to maintain what I feel should be strong standards in general practice.

— Dr Penny Need, RACGP member since 2007.