



Restoring normality is the focus for plastic surgeon Deirdre Seoighe, who has joined Braemar Hospital.

In her career as a plastic surgeon, Deirdre Seoighe has treated some horrendous injuries. In 2019, when Whakaari/White Island erupted she was the clinical lead for burns when eight critically injured survivors were brought to Waikato Hospital; she has seen hands mangled in work injuries and bodies disfigured by accidents. In Ireland, she once treated the victim of a Samurai sword fight. But it is the smaller events she recalls when asked what stands out in her career.

“A woman came in to clinic with what seemed to me a very minor pathology. I reassured her but it did seem to really bother her and I knew it would take only a few minutes to fix it. So I put her on the operating list and fixed it and thought nothing more about it. Six months later, I got a letter from her to say how much it had changed her life. It had given her the confidence for the first time to get a job. And I had thought nothing of it. So that was a lesson to me.”

But she also remembers the big events and the skill of the team she works with at Waikato DHB in dealing with trauma events such as the Whakaari eruption. It is one of the reasons she has chosen to raise her family here with her New Zealand-born husband and orthopaedic spine surgeon Joe Baker.

Deirdre was born just outside Dublin, one of six children. Two siblings are doctors, two are physicists and one a pharmacist. She completed a pharmacy degree at Trinity College, Dublin with the intention of working in industry, developing drug technologies; when she found herself being forced into community pharmacy, she switched to medicine deciding on plastic surgery as a specialty following her first placement as an intern at Beaumont Hospital in Dublin. Plastic surgery is considered the biggest trauma specialty after orthopaedics and its practitioners are primarily concerned with function, not appearance. “Restoring normality as opposed to enhancing normality or augmenting what is perfectly normal,” she says. When faced with a severe injury, she goes back to the first principles of her training: Define the defect. “You take away the dirt and the dead tissue and find out what the problem is then start working from there. It’s a methodical, clear-headed approach. You have the algorithms. You know what to do and you do it with as much compassion as possible.”

At the time of the Whakaari eruption she was on maternity leave and fully breast-feeding her son, then aged three months. When the hospital asked her to come in, she took him with her and, for two weeks,

staff at the hospital cared for him while she operated. She remembers the event for the skill of the team she worked with, but also for the compassion they showed in treating patients, some of whom were unidentifiable because of their burns. She wishes there was more time for compassion in medicine. "I can sit down with a patient and tell them they have Stage 4 melanoma and what that means in clinical terms, but to sit down with them and talk about their concerns and worries is just as important." From her own family history, she knows the benefits of caring for patients in a holistic way. Her Irish grandmother was known for treating injured people in the community, especially those with burns. "She had no formal training but she would look after them. It was not so much the healing part, but looking after people. She knew how to care for them."

She also wishes there were more female surgeons. In Ireland, only 7 per cent of surgeons are women; in New Zealand 11 per cent according to the Australasian College of Surgeons. One of her roles is mentoring and offering pastoral care to other women surgeons. She was once told she couldn't interview for a job because

she was pregnant. "I have never missed a day despite having terrible morning sickness with four kids. To say women aren't tough enough or strong enough is not true."

But she rates the New Zealand public health system highly, and far superior to other countries, including Ireland. "When a burns patient comes in, insurance status is not a question. I give them the best treatment available and know it will all be covered."

At Braemar, Deirdre's work will include skin cancers, burns reconstruction and some hand surgery. As well as her role at Waikato DHB, she also does a fortnightly list at Middlemore Hospital and a monthly clinic and operating list at Gisborne.



Dr Greg Spark

DEIRDRE SEOIGHE

Qualifications

MB BCH, BAO, MCh, FRCS (Plast)

Rooms at

Waikato Specialist Centre
83c Tristram Street
Hamilton Central
Phone: 07 838 8984

Areas of Specialisation

Burns – Acute Management and Secondary Scar
Reconstruction
Skin Cancer
Hand Surgery

Specialist Training

Fellowship in Burns Surgery at Middlemore Hospital

Positions & Memberships

Clinical Lead for Burns Surgery in the Waikato Region

