

Waikato now home to one of worlds top heart surgeons

The phone call to Adam El Gamel saying he was on the short list for a clinical director's position at Waikato Hospital took one of the world's most experienced heart surgeons by surprise.

El Gamel was on holiday in Australia in July last year with wife Valerie and children Nancy and Oliver when the call came through from Hamilton.

'I didn't know anything about it. We were visiting our friends in Adelaide; I was on the Great Ocean Rd driving a campervan with the kids and my wife having a great time and my mobile phone rings.

'The person said 'the job you applied for at Waikato, you've been shortlisted. Are you interested in coming and seeing'? I said 'what job?' Turned out Valerie had been harbouring thoughts of leaving the UK. She wanted a change of lifestyle for the family away from the hustle and bustle of London and El Gamel's life as a consultant and head senior lecturer in cardiothoracic surgery at Kings' College Hospital, Being a Fellow of the Royal College and Cardiothoracic Surgeons examiner was all-consuming. They had very little free time to spend together.'

'She wanted to be in the countryside and she wanted to see nature. I didn't know what she was up to. She got my CV together, looked on the internet, and applied for jobs without me having any idea at all' Once he'd spoken with his wife and found out where else she'd sent his CV off to, El Gamel rang back Waikato to say he was in Australia and was it worth coming over to New Zealand?

'They said to me 'yes you better come and have a look. Bring the whole family because the decision is a family one'. So they crossed the Tasman for a very short three-day unexpected side trip.

Valerie, originally from Lancashire and a qualified nurse practitioner with an interest in heart failure and family medicine, fell in love with the Waikato countryside and in three days, she had looked at both schools and houses, finding a school in Cambridge and a house she wanted in Whatawhata.

Meanwhile El Gamel visited Waikato Hospital and thought it looked promising and offered a great opportunity and challenge at this time of his career.

When offered the job, he took it partly because he felt he owed it to his wife, but also because, 'I thrive on a challenge. Valerie supported my career a lot over many years and she has coped with frequent moving all over the world including America for a couple of years. Her overall career has been disadvantaged and she was never been able to hold a job for her career for long periods.

'She wants to be on a farm, and enjoy the lifestyle it offers and the Waikato gives that opportunity. For me, I just love being in the operating theatre. The Waikato offered that as well as some positive challenges for me. ' However, returning to London, having to grapple with applications for residency, and trying to sell the house, he wondered whether he'd actually made the right decision.

His colleagues thought he was mad - going through a mid life crisis.

It was when he was in the dentist's chair that he heard about another doctor, also named Adam - plastic surgeon Adam Greenbaum - who was going also, leaving the bright lights of London for Hamilton.

'The dentist said to me 'what's happening to all of you guys?' I said 'Waikato Hospital is expanding, with new buildings and new staff and yes the Waikato countryside is beautiful.' El Gamel started at the hospital in January. 'Suddenly I'm here and it's like I've been here for years,' he says.



His son Oliver is already in New Zealand boarding at St Peter's School in Cambridge. Valerie and daughter Nancy are still in the UK; Valerie trying to sell the family home in Beckenham, Kent and Nancy studying for A levels so she can go to university at Otago.

The plan is for the family to all be in New Zealand by May.

El Gamel, sits in his office that previously was the cardiothoracic surgery department kitchen renovated so he had somewhere to work.

Originally, from Egypt - his father was a diplomat in London when El Gamel was doing his A levels. When El Gamel Snr moved to a post in Paris, his son said there was no way he was going and that he would stay in England. He graduated from Ain Shams University of Cairo and started his operating career as a general surgeon at the University Hospital but general surgery wasn't challenging enough for him.

'I told my boss I was getting bored and he suggested trying cardiothoracic surgery.' Cardiothoracic surgery is the field of medicine involved in surgical treatment of diseases affecting organs inside the thorax (the chest), generally treatment of conditions of the heart (heart disease) and lungs (lung disease).

'I thought it was like driving a Ferrari; it was like being in a race car.

'You get into a car, you have to be careful around the bends and there are lots of turns and bends.' He moved to London, started work at the Hammersmith Hospital, and then had stints in Nottingham, Birmingham, Coventry, Yale University in the USA, Stoke-on-Trent, Manchester University and from November 1998 he became a consultant and senior lecturer in cardiothoracic surgery at the prestigious Kings College Hospital in London.

In 2004, he received the Daily Mail Award for unsung heroes of the National Health Service for his success rate with heart operations.

Over the last three years he carried out 349 operations each year, most were bypass procedures with a 99.4 per cent survival rate amongst his patients.

Looking ahead to a new challenge, El Gamel was aware that the number of operations at Waikato was below the government expectation of 600 cases per year.

El Gamel says: 'Clearly we have some talented people around. We've just been clogged up with the day-to-day work and have found it difficult to do the more complex operations and increase in numbers. Waikato has good supportive clinical teams and we need to take every opportunity and make the most of it.' He's found the whole cardiothoracic team enthusiastic and willing to take on the extra work.

'We already have the skilled people; What was needed was someone to push the buttons,' he says.

'People dream about achieving something and you always need that someone with a dream to make positive change within any department.

'I like a challenge and I can't live without a dream.

'My dream is to work with my colleagues and become the best cardiothoracic unit within New Zealand as a centre of excellence, and a respected unit internationally by doing everything that can be done everywhere else.

I want the department to do everything locally and not have to send any cases out of region to Auckland, or even Australia. The government has put cardiac surgery on the top of its health agenda and the challenge for Waikato is to deliver to the government expectations.

'Because of that, there is a good opportunity for cardiac surgery to move to another level. We have the government behind us and the local population needs and deserves it.

'When I was at Kings, people from throughout the UK, Europe and the Middle East came there to have their operations done. Once you establish a centre with a certain reputation, that's what happens.'

El Gamel is passionate about research and teaching. He has published many publications and holds several patents for new surgical appliances.

Less than two months into his tenure at Waikato and his mind is full of developing research ideas involving Maori and Pacific Islanders.

‘They do come to hospital at a later stage of their illness and medically they are challenging to look after and they need a custom-made solution to suit their lifestyle and culture.’ To him it appears that many Maori do not access primary care early enough that will ensure a good health outcome. He also notes that most have a good whanau support network, however sees work around the ongoing understanding and compliance with lifelong medications will improve health.

‘You can always fix the heart, that’s the easiest part of it. There’s nothing more rewarding than seeing a patient getting well as whole person,’ says El Gamel ‘If you are in a desert, you have to use the tools you’ve got to hand to get someone better.

‘This is where the challenges come and where the opportunities for research come,’ he says.

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