The national forensic pathology service would struggle to cope if another earthquake as lethal as the Christchurch shakes occurred today, says the clinical leader of the service.

Clinical Director Simon Stables says the country’s small team of forensic pathologists is so stretched already that shouldering the extra workload associated with a natural disaster is almost unthinkable.

“We don’t have the numbers,” he says.

Fellow forensic pathologist Paul Morrow agrees.

“One of the things we always have hanging over our heads is the potential for something like a plane or bus crash, or an earthquake,” he says. “Frankly, it could be a real embarrassment for the Government if a disaster should happen because they would find out very quickly that the resources are not available in New Zealand to deal with it.

“We’re managing at the moment, but our ability to do so is razor thin.”

Another forensic pathologist, Joanna Glengarry, says the national service is very vulnerable.

“All it would take is for someone to get sick while someone else is away, and we’d have just one forensic pathologist covering the whole upper half of New Zealand. The shortage we’re dealing with could quickly become catastrophic.”

Forensic pathology hit the headlines earlier this year when media reported that the national service was on the brink of a “catastrophic unravelling”, with the prospect that some autopsies might not get done and inquests would be put off (http://www.radionz.co.nz/news/national/300667/crisis-time-for-forensic-pathology-doctor-warns). That might sound dramatic but forensic pathologists say it’s an accurate assessment of the situation. There simply aren’t enough of them to do the work with enough stretch within the team to handle anything unexpected that arises.

Drs Simon Stables, Paul Morrow and Joanna Glengarry are based at LabPlus at Auckland Hospital, and provide forensic pathology for the upper half of the North Island. The remaining forensic pathologists are based in Palmerston North, Wellington and Christchurch. Together, the six of them form the National Forensic Pathology Service administered by Auckland DHB under contract to the Ministry of Justice. That contract is currently being renegotiated.

The national service came into existence in 2005 after years of negotiations, replacing an ad hoc system that Simon Stables says lacked structure, resourcing, governance, adequate succession planning, career advancement or ongoing training programmes. It provides a round-the-clock service to police, coroners and the public, and carries out about 1600 post mortems each year. According to Auckland DHB, between 170 and 190 post mortems are associated with homicides or suspicious deaths.

The service used to provide post mortem support to Samoa, Rarotonga and Tonga, but Simon Stables says it is not in a position to do so now unless it has more forensic pathologists. In the meantime, those countries are turning to Australia for assistance.

Like other specialties, to become a forensic pathologist involves years of additional training following medical graduation and experience as a house surgeon. There are a couple of pathways into the specialty. Some doctors choose
to do a forensic fellowship involving five years of study with the Royal College of Pathologists Australasia, while others opt to train first as an anatomic pathologist before completing a Diploma in Forensic Pathology, which means an extra six years of study at a minimum.

Those years of specialty training are still very fresh in the mind of Joanna Glengarry, who, at 37, is one of the service’s two most recently qualified specialists. Initially she wanted to be a surgeon but was drawn instead to anatomic and then forensic pathology.

“It was clear to me in my third year during my mortuary rotation that forensic pathology was the career for me,” she says. “It was that brilliant mix of surgery and pathology, as well as the medical legal side and the opportunity to interact with the coroners and courts. It was just so fascinating, and a great intellectual challenge.”

She completed the Diploma in Forensic Pathology in Melbourne two years ago, and has been back working in New Zealand since the start of 2015.

So, is she enjoying it?

She hesitates. The work is so varied, she says. It’s interesting and rewarding, and the medical side of things is wonderful. She has great colleagues, and there’s no other job she would rather be doing.

“But for one of the forensic pathologists, the glass is wearing off. I’m supposed to be the ridiculously enthusiastic young person in the department, but that’s not how it is,” says Joanna Glengarry. She was bonded to return to New Zealand following her Diploma training in Melbourne but is struggling to see why she should stay here when that bonding period ends early next year.

“It feels extraordinarily disloyal to be thinking about going back to Australia. I have the utmost respect and fondness for my colleagues, so the idea of leaving is very hard and is not a decision I’ll make lightly – but there’s just so much more I could achieve in a place that is better resourced.”