



Richard Kruse.

In the swim

The duties of a water treatment operator are demanding but rewarding, according to Richard Kruse. By **MARY SEARLE BELL**.

Until he was recently promoted to assistant manager water and wastewater for the Taupo District Council, Richard Kruse was its water treatment supervisor. It is a job he loved – both the highs and lows.

“I enjoy pressure situations. Overcoming a big issue and getting things up and running again is a huge high.”

Richard is responsible for 19 water schemes around the district. These vary in size, ranging from the lake-fed main Taupo supply, which boasts a \$28 million membrane plant and serves the city’s 30,000 population (rising to 60,000 during the peak tourist season), down to a number of small bore schemes that each serve a handful of households.

Richard says the main supply is the easiest to operate as “it has all the bells and whistles” and causes very few problems. Some of the others, however, are a lot more basic.

There are seven other lake-fed schemes, six bore supplies that Rich says are “really good”, and the rest are simple river- and stream-fed systems.

“Basically, we draw from the source, screen and chlorinate.

“All of the schemes are constantly monitored. We check chlorine, pH levels and turbidity. And we keep an eye on arsenic levels – we’re geothermic and that does mean elevated arsenic levels.”

Richard feels a big responsibility for the public’s health

– all too aware of the potential consequences if something goes wrong.

“The disaster in Havelock North was a good wake-up call for water treatment operators – they had a range of issues that resulted in a disastrous outcome. We can learn a lot from their mistakes, and ensure we have good processes in place to prevent it happening to us.

“It’s a huge responsibility we have,” he says. “I would like to see the different bodies – councils, inspectors and regulators – working closer together. We need to focus on getting these relationships working better to ensure this kind of thing never happens again.”

Rich began his career with a drainlaying apprenticeship after leaving school at the end of his fifth form year. Within two years he was qualified, and he spent eight years in the trade until the constant repetition of the work got too much for him.

“It was endless digging trenches and laying pipes. It wasn’t as challenging as I had hoped,” he says.

“A position came up with the Taupo District Council – they were looking for a water service person. I didn’t really know what that was but applied anyway. I took a hit in pay, but I’ve never looked back.”

That was 2006 and Rich was 25 years old. Three or so years later, when the role of maintenance team leader

came up, he applied for the position and got it. And three years after that he was made supervisor, responsible for the operation and maintenance of all the district's water schemes.

Along the way, Rich has picked up the necessary relevant qualifications – he holds a National Certificate Level 4 in Water Treatment and a National Diploma Level 5 in Water Treatment. He is currently studying towards a National Certificate in First Line Management Level 4.

“My new role has me overseeing wastewater as well as drinking water, and I still have lots to learn,” he says. “I have had the luxury of growing in the role – and I’m never bored.

“I have been very fortunate to have had supportive managers that have given me so many opportunities along the way – Taupo District Council are fantastic employers,” he says. “I wouldn’t be able to do my job well and also contribute to the WIOG (Water Industry Operators Group) committee without their support.”

Rich has been a member of WIOG since 2014, was named Operator of the Year in 2015, and was elected to its committee earlier this year. He says the group has opened up many opportunities for him and is a fantastic organisation to be involved with, to share knowledge and strive for excellence.

“ We prioritise our work – we have our scheduled and planned jobs but then it all goes out the window with unplanned maintenance. I have to juggle staff when we’ve been called out at night – it keeps me on my toes. ”

It comes as no surprise, considering his career progression with the council and success in the industry that one of the highs of his role is seeing his staff develop and grow, and learning off one another.

For himself, his focus is moving to plant optimisation and utilising new technologies.

“We’re always looking to improve.”

Rich is a big fan of the current review of industry qualifications, saying “it’s a huge responsibility we’ve got for the public health”.

The current revision of the drinking water standards is also something close to Rich’s heart. In Taupo, they have been unable to upgrade a number of their smaller schemes as the ratepayers simply can’t fund it. However, Rich says the council is looking at its funding methods to try and improve this.

His primary focus is to maintain compliance across all 19 schemes. His limited budget sometimes means things have to be done the long way or the hard way – with more site visits, and some schemes particularly labour intensive.

“Accessing some of our sites in adverse weather can be tricky.”

Rain and mud aside, Rich says staff management is one of the bigger challenges of his role.

“We prioritise our work – we have our scheduled and planned jobs but then it all goes out the window with unplanned maintenance. I have to juggle staff when we’ve been called out at night – it keeps me on my toes.”

The night callouts are one of the few lows of the job.

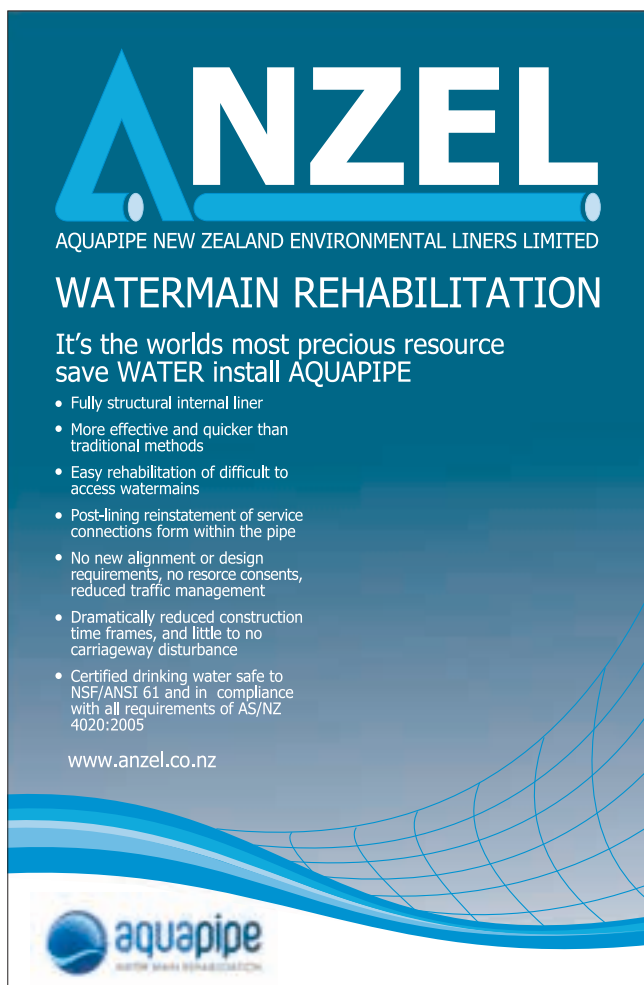
“One-offs are okay, but sometimes you get a week of it – one thing after another. It’s probably because we have so many different schemes, we can get a ‘perfect storm’ of issues – the weather will cause problems, then the comms will play up, then we’ll get a burst main...”

“It can be challenging!”

This, combined with a young family, can have a big impact on home life. Fortunately, Rich has an understanding wife, and he loves his job.

“We have plenty of laughs at work too,” he says. “Our team has a pretty good relationship – we take the job seriously, but still take the mickey out of each other.

“We sometimes have to work some very long hours at pretty anti-social times. In an extreme weather event, we can spend hours trying different options to fix a problem, but when we do find success and get things up and running again, it feels great.” **WNZ**




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