

20 Employment and occupation

20.1 Background

Occupation is an important determinant of the types of morbidity experienced by Australian workers (Foley 1996). There has been a long-term lack of information on the extent to which GPs manage work-related conditions. This lack of information means that there is potentially a significant source of work-related morbidity in the community that is not being recognised by governments or the occupational health and safety community. The extent of this morbidity, especially for groups such as the self-employed, warrants investigation. Some of these conditions are likely to present to general practitioners and to have their costs covered by Medicare. Using the sub-sampling methodology of BEACH, it was decided to investigate the employment status and occupations of persons presenting to general practice and the types of conditions managed for particular employment and occupation groups.

20.2 Research questions

1. What proportion of patients presenting to general practice are employed and in what types of occupation?
2. What are the most common problems managed for those employed patients presenting to general practice?
3. What are the most common problems managed for retirees and unemployed patients and do they differ from those managed for employed patients?
4. What are the most common problems managed for patients in particular occupational groups?

20.3 SAND questions

Box 20.1: Employment and occupation

GPs asked the patients (15+ years):

- ◆ How would you describe your current employment status?

Self-employed
Employed by other
Unemployed
Home duties
Student and working
Student and not working
Retired
Unable to work due to health problems
Other (specify)

- ◆ How many hours do you normally spend in all paid jobs each week?
- ◆ What is your current occupation?
- ◆ In what industry are you currently employed?
- ◆ What was/is your main lifetime occupation?
- ◆ What was/is your main work activity?

20.4 Results

Sample size was 4,355 patient encounters from 219 GPs.

Current employment status

Of all respondents, 67.8% (CI: 65.7–70.0) were not in the labour force and 32.2% (95% CI: 30–34.3) were in the labour force. Those not in the work force were mainly retirees (28.1% of all respondents) and students (14.7% of all respondents).

Industries were coded using the Australian and New Zealand Standard Industrial Classification (ANZSIC) (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1993). The main industries in which the respondents in the work force were currently employed were retail trade (15.7%, 95% CI: 14.2–17.1), health and community services (12.6%, 95% CI: 11.4–13.7) and manufacturing (10.7%, 95% CI: 9.7–11.6).

Current occupation

Current occupation was analysed by the Australian Standard Classification of Occupations (ASCO) major groups, sub-groups and individual occupations (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1997b). Current occupation analysed by major group showed that most currently employed patients described themselves as ‘professionals’ followed by ‘intermediate clerical/sales/service’ workers (Figure 20.1). The distribution across major groups demonstrated a similar pattern to that from the ABS labour force survey (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1999), though these two groups were slightly over-represented in the patient sub-sample while other groups were slightly under-represented. The most common current

occupations at the ASCO 6-digit level were 'sales assistant', 'general clerk' and 'school teacher'.

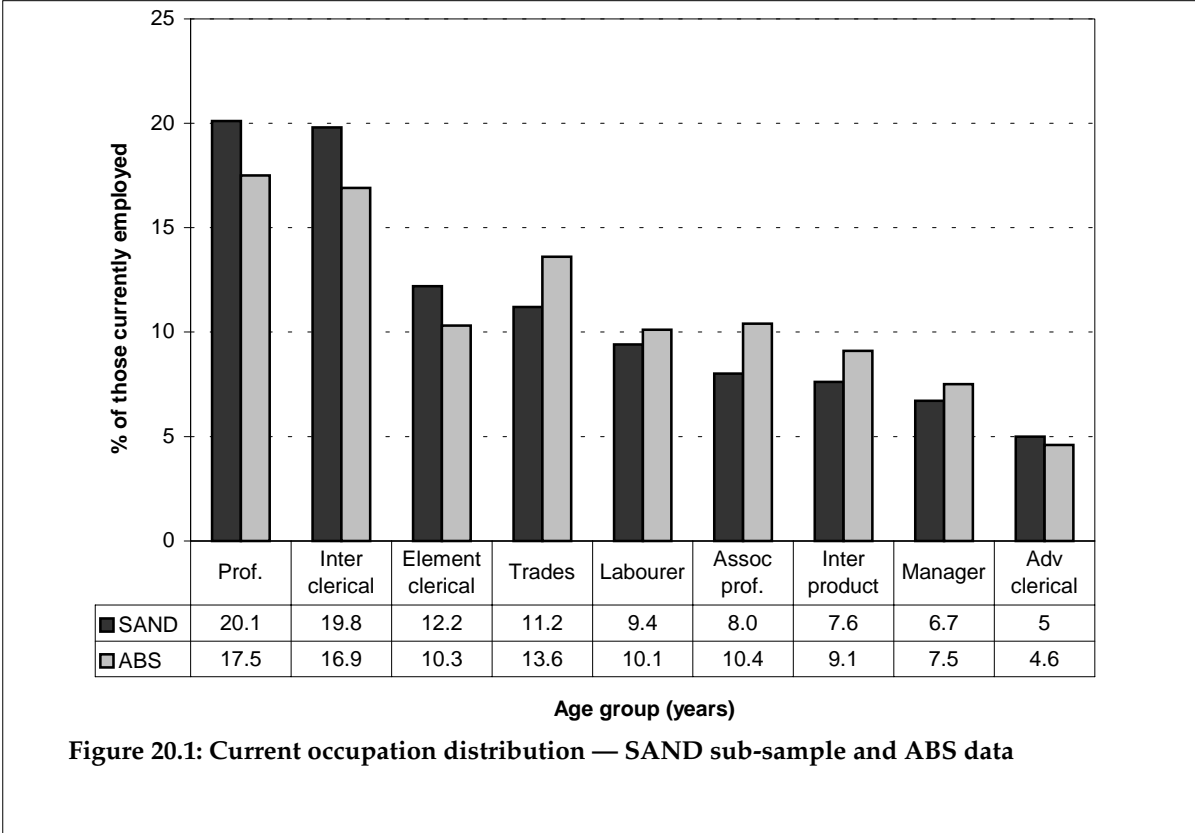
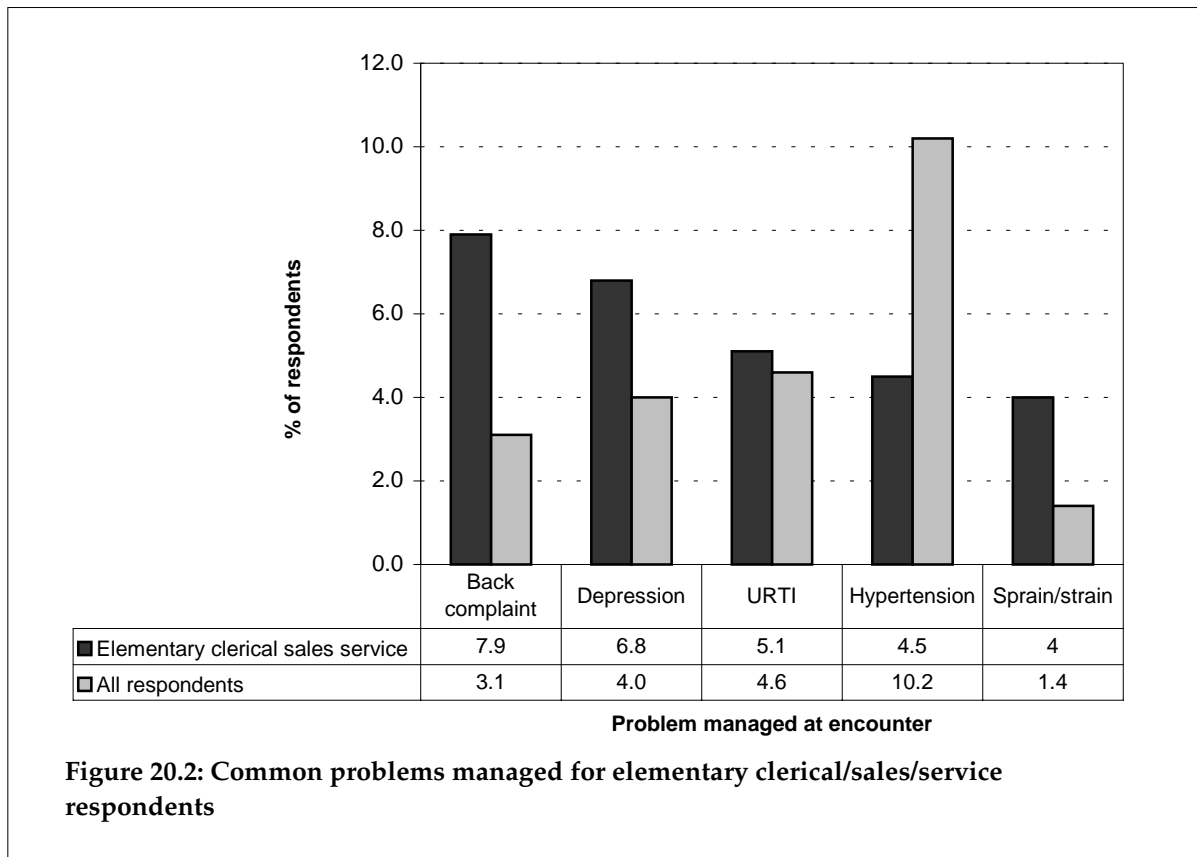


Figure 20.1: Current occupation distribution — SAND sub-sample and ABS data

Note: Abbreviations: Prof. = professionals, Inter clerical = intermediate clerical/sales/service, Element clerical = elementary clerical/sales/service, Trades = tradespersons, Assoc prof. = associate professionals, Inter product = intermediate production/transport, Manager = managers and administrators, Adv clerical = advanced clerical/service

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics 1999

Problems managed at the consultation were linked to the occupation of the patient. These data were analysed for different occupation groups and compared with the distribution of all problems managed for the same period. For all respondents, the most common problems managed were hypertension, immunisation and upper respiratory infection. However, this varied between different employment status groups and different occupation groups. Not surprisingly, hypertension was managed at a lower rate for employed patients than for all respondents but at a far higher rate for retirees than for all respondents. An example of the differences among occupation groups is shown for elementary clerical/sales/service workers whose back complaint, depression and sprains/strains were managed at a far higher rate than among all respondents (Figure 20.2).



20.5 Discussion

Collection of data pertaining to the employment and occupational status of general practice patients has enabled the identification of the most common occupational groups that are attending general practice. The morbidity associated with particular occupational groups has been examined only briefly in this report. The influence of age, gender and other factors will need to be more thoroughly investigated to determine the independent effect of occupation on morbidity managed in general practice. The influence of time spent in employment would also need to be considered if we are to have a better understanding of the effect of over-working or under-working on health. However, these data go some way towards addressing the lack of information regarding the morbidity of particular occupation groups and provide the opportunity for a closer examination of occupation and health as seen through general practice.