

## 4 The participating GPs

This chapter reports data collected between April 2008 and March 2009 about the participating GPs and their practices from the 11th year of the BEACH program. Data on GP and practice characteristics are reported for each year from 1999–00 to 2008–09 in the 10-year summary report *General practice activity in Australia 1999–00 to 2008–09: 10 year data tables*.<sup>1</sup>

### 4.1 Characteristics of the GP participants

All participants returned a GP profile questionnaire, although some were incomplete. The results are provided in Table 4.1. Of the 1,011 participants:

- 68% were male, and 46% were aged 55 years and over
- more than 70% had been in general practice for more than 20 years
- 74% had graduated in Australia
- 24% conducted some consultations in a language other than English
- 40% were Fellows of the RACGP
- 78% worked 6–10 clinical sessions per week, 12% worked fewer than six sessions per week, and only 10% worked more than 10 sessions per week.
- 43% spent more than 40 hours each week on direct patient care services
- 55% had provided care in a residential aged care facility in the previous month
- more than 60% were in practices of fewer than five full-time equivalent GPs
- 73% practised in major cities (classified using the Australian Standard Geographical Classification)
- 85% worked in an accredited practice
- 68% worked in a practice that employed practice nurse(s)
- 43% worked in a practice that provided their own or cooperative after-hours care, and 58% in a practice that used a deputising service for after-hours patient care (multiple responses allowed)
- 55% worked in a teaching practice for undergraduates, junior doctors, registrars, or both
- 25% bulk-billed Medicare for all patients; 47% bulk-billed for all consultations with pensioner/Commonwealth concession cardholders, and 34% bulk-billed for all consultations with children (multiple responses allowed).

Those interested in the clinical activity of overseas-trained doctors will find more information in Bayram et al. (2007) *Clinical activity of overseas-trained doctors practising in general practice in Australia*.<sup>49</sup>

Readers interested in the effects of GP age on clinical practice will find more information in Charles et al. (2006) *The independent effect of age of general practitioner on clinical practice*.<sup>50</sup>

**Table 4.1: Characteristics of participating GPs and their practices**

<b>GP characteristic</b>	<b>Number<sup>(a)</sup></b>	<b>Per cent of GPs<sup>(a)</sup> (n = 1,011)</b>
Sex (missing = 0)		
Male	682	67.5
Female	329	32.5
Age (missing = 4)		
< 35 years	26	2.6
35–44 years	141	14.0
45–54 years	378	37.5
55+ years	462	45.9
Years in general practice (missing = 6)		
< 2 years	1	0.1
2–5 years	34	3.4
6–10 years	57	5.7
11–19 years	194	19.3
20+ years	719	71.5
Size of practice—full-time equivalent GPs (missing = 8)		
< 2	197	19.6
2–4	430	42.9
5–9	295	29.4
10+	81	8.1
Practice location by RRMA (missing = 0)		
Capital	675	66.8
Other metropolitan	101	10.0
Large rural	56	5.5
Small rural	62	6.1
Other rural	104	10.3
Remote central	4	0.4
Other remote, offshore	9	0.9
Practice location by ASGC remoteness structure (missing = 0)		
Major cities	742	73.4
Inner regional	182	18.0
Outer regional	73	7.2
Remote	9	0.9
Very remote	5	0.5
Place of graduation (missing = 2)		
Australia	750	74.3
United Kingdom	104	10.3
Asia	84	8.3
Europe	19	1.9
Africa	38	3.8

*(continued)*

**Table 4.1 (continued): Characteristics of participating GPs and their practices**

<b>GP characteristic</b>	<b>Number<sup>(a)</sup></b>	<b>Per cent of GPs<sup>(a)</sup> (n = 1,011)</b>
Consult in languages other than English (missing = 3)		
< 25% of consultations	177	17.5
25–50% of consultations	35	3.5
> 50% of consultations	30	3.0
Currently in general practice training program (missing = 4)	15	1.5
Fellow of RACGP (missing = 7)	399	39.7
Fellow of ACRRM (missing = 20)	79	8.0
Accredited practice (missing = 2)	862	85.4
Practice nurse at major practice address (missing = 0)	705	67.7
Sessions per week (missing = 6)		
< 6 per week	125	12.4
6–10 per week	784	78.0
11+ per week	96	9.6
Direct patient care hours (worked) per week (missing = 16)		
≤ 10 hours	3	0.3
11–20 hours	73	7.3
21–40 hours	492	49.5
41–60 hours	400	40.2
60+ hours	27	2.7
Patient care provided in previous month <sup>(b)</sup> (missing = 14)		
As a locum	23	2.3
In a deputising service	26	2.6
In a residential aged care facility	545	54.7
As a salaried/sessional hospital medical officer	103	10.3
None of the above	403	40.4
After-hours arrangements <sup>(b)</sup> (missing = 6)		
Practice does own and/or cooperative with other practices	428	42.6
Practice does its own	290	28.9
Cooperative with other practices	152	15.1
Deputising service	582	57.9
Referral to other service (e.g. emergency hospital dept)	159	15.8
Other arrangement	41	4.1
Bulk-billing <sup>(b)</sup> (missing = 1)		
All patients	252	25.0
All pension/Commonwealth concession cardholders	479	47.4
Some pension/Commonwealth concession cardholders	246	24.4
All children	347	34.4
Some children	321	31.8
Selected other patients	561	55.5

*(continued)*

**Table 4.1 (continued): Characteristics of participating GPs and their practices**

GP characteristic	Number <sup>(a)</sup>	Per cent of GPs <sup>(a)</sup> ( <i>n</i> = 1,011)
Major practice a teaching practice <sup>(b)</sup> (missing = 1)		
Not a teaching practice	456	45.1
Yes—for undergraduates	471	46.6
Yes—for junior doctors	67	6.6
Yes—for registrars	285	28.2

(a) Missing data removed.

(b) Multiple responses allowed.

Note: RRMA—Rural, Remote and Metropolitan Areas classification; ASGC—Australian Standard Geographical Classification; RACGP—Royal Australian College of General Practitioners; ACRRM—Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine.

## 4.2 Computer use at GP practices

As computers are increasingly being used by GPs in their clinical activity, a decision was made at the beginning of 2008–09 to redesign the GP profile questionnaire so that more comprehensive information could be collected about the uses to which computers are put in a general practice clinical environment. Rather than expand the existing list of questions, awareness of the time constraints currently being experienced by GPs resulted in the decision to discontinue with questions about computer use at the practice level and concentrate on individual GP use. In particular, more specific information was collected about pathology test ordering and receipt of results, and about medical records.

Table 4.2 shows the proportion of individual participating GPs who used computers for each of nine listed activities:

- only 5.3% of GPs did not use a computer at all for clinical purposes
- computers were used mainly for prescribing, receiving pathology results electronically and for internet use
- 77.0% of GPs were producing prescriptions electronically
- 73% were receiving pathology results on line, and three in five were producing and printing pathology orders via their clinical software
- 22% were ordering pathology electronically
- more than half (54%) had electronic medical records exclusively (i.e. were paperless)
- over one-third (34%) reported maintaining a hybrid record where some patient information is kept electronically and some on paper records (for the same patients)

**Table 4.2: Computer applications available/used at major practice address**

Computer use	Number	Per cent of GPs ( <i>n</i> = 1,011) <sup>(a)</sup>	Per cent of GPs with computers ( <i>n</i> = 955) <sup>(a)</sup>
Not at all	53	5.3	—
Prescribing	776	77.0	81.3
Internet	711	70.5	74.5
Email	583	57.8	61.1
Pathology ordering (on line)	225	22.3	23.6
Produce/print pathology orders only	577	57.2	60.4
Pathology results receipt (on line)	739	73.3	77.4
Medical records—complete (paperless)	539	53.5	56.4
Partial/hybrid records	345	34.2	36.1
Paper records only	53	5.3	5.5
Missing	3	—	—

(a) Missing data removed.

Further information about reported individual GP use of computers at the practice can be found in Henderson et al. (2006) *Extent and utilisation of computerisation in Australian general practice*.<sup>51</sup> Those interested in the effect of computerisation on quality of care in general practice will find more detailed information in Henderson (2007) *The effect of computerisation on the quality of care in Australian general practice*.<sup>52</sup>

### 4.3 Changes in characteristics of the GPs over the decade 1999–00 to 2008–09

Changes over the decade 1999–00 to 2008–09 are described in detail in the accompanying report *General practice activity in Australia 1999–00 to 2008–09: 10 year data tables*.<sup>1</sup> Briefly, the major changes noted were:

- the proportion of GP participants who were female increased over time
- the proportion of GPs who were younger than 44 years decreased, whereas the proportion aged 45 years or more increased over the decade
- reflecting the increase in the age of GP participants, the proportion who had worked in general practice for more than 20 years also increased significantly over time
- in 2008–09 more GPs worked fewer than 6 sessions per week, and fewer worked more than 10 sessions per week, than a decade earlier
- the proportion of GPs in solo practice and smaller practices decreased significantly, and the proportion of GPs in practices with 5 or more practitioners steadily increased
- the proportion of participants holding the Fellowship of the RACGP increased over the decade
- fewer practices are providing after-hours care on their own, or in cooperation with other practices, than a decade earlier.