

## 13 Practice nurse activity

This section describes the activities of practice nurses recorded in association with the GP-patient encounters recorded by the GPs in BEACH.

In February 2004, two Medicare item numbers were introduced into the MBS that allowed GPs to claim for specified tasks undertaken by a practice nurse under the direction of the GP. The BEACH recording form (see Appendix 1) was amended to allow the capture of this information from April 2005 onwards.

- GPs were allowed to record multiple (up to three) Medicare item numbers where appropriate, rather than be limited to one item number.
- In the 'other treatments' section, for each problem managed GPs were asked to tick the 'practice nurse' box if the treatment recorded was provided by the practice nurse rather than by the GP. If the box was not ticked it was assumed that the GP provided the 'other treatment'.

The survey form allowed GPs to record up to two other treatments for each problem managed at the encounter. Other treatments include all clinical and procedural treatments provided at the encounters. These groups are defined in Appendix 4.

Between February 2004 and July 2007 five new practice nurse items were added. Recent additions were: item 00711 – child health checks by practice nurses or Aboriginal health workers); item 10987 – follow up after an Indigenous health check in rural or remote areas. These two items were therefore available for the part of the BEACH year reported here. The seven practice nurse Medicare items recorded by GPs during the 2008–09 BEACH data period<sup>62</sup> are listed with a short description in Table 13.2.

This section investigates: the distribution of the Medicare items claimed for practice nurses (these items are reported as two groups in Table 5.5); treatments provided by practice nurses in association with the GP-recorded encounters; problems for which the practice nurse provided the treatment in direct association with the GP-recorded encounters.

In Chapter 10, all clinical and procedural treatments recorded by the GPs were reported, irrespective of whether they were provided by the GP or by a practice nurse. As in previous years, injections recorded in the provision of immunisations and vaccinations were not included, as these are already counted as pharmacological management. In contrast, this section, being a description of practice nurse activity, reports only the activities indicated as being conducted by a practice nurse and includes the injections for immunisation/vaccination that were not counted in Chapter 10. GPs are also instructed not to record their taking of routine clinical measurements, such as blood pressure. However, where the practice nurse undertook these activities at the consultation, and it was recorded as a practice nurse activity, they have been included in the analysis in this chapter.

When viewing these results, it must be remembered that these practice nurse data will not include activities undertaken by the practice nurse during the GP's BEACH recording period that were outside (not associated with) the recorded encounter. Such activities could include Medicare-claimable activities (for example, immunisations/vaccinations) provided under instruction from the GP but not provided at the time of the encounter recorded in BEACH, or provision of other services not currently claimable from Medicare (for example, dietary advice on a one-to-one basis, or in a group situation).

## 13.1 Practice nurse Medicare claims and practice nurse activity

Practice nurses were involved in 6,183 (6.4%) GP-patient encounters. Simple extrapolation of this result suggests that during 2008–09 practice nurses were involved in about 7.2 million GP-patient consultations.

At 131 (2.1%) encounters practice nurse involvement was indicated by the recording of practice nurse item numbers claimable from Medicare, but the activity/ies undertaken by the practice nurse was not described. At the remaining 6,052 encounters for which practice nurse activity was described, they were involved in the management of 6,281 problems (4.2% of all problems managed at all encounters).

At only 2,416 (39.1%) of the 6,183 encounters involving the practice nurse, was a practice nurse Medicare item recorded, and in total 2,438 practice nurse items were recorded at a rate of 2.5 per 100 BEACH encounters. Practice nurse items accounted for 2.2% of all Medicare items recorded in 2008–09 (Table 5.5). At almost two-thirds (60.9%) of encounters in which the practice nurse was involved, no practice nurse item number was recorded as claimable (Table 13.1).

**Table 13.1: Summary of practice nurse involvement at encounter**

Variable	Number
Total encounters	96,688
Encounters involving practice nurse	6,183
Encounters at which practice nurse activity described	6,052
Encounters with practice nurse item number(s) but activity not described	131
Encounters at which 1 or more practice nurse item numbers were recorded as claimable	2,416
Total problems managed ( <i>n</i> )	149,462
Problems managed with practice nurse involvement	6,281
	<b>Per cent (95% CI)</b>
Encounters involving the practice nurse as a proportion of total encounters	6.4 (5.8–7.0)
Practice nurse claimable encounters as a proportion of total encounters	2.5%
Proportion of practice nurse involved encounters for which one or more practice item numbers were claimed from Medicare	39.1 (35.9–42.3)
Problems involving the practice nurse as a proportion of total problems (95% CI)	4.2 (3.8–4.6)

Note: CI—confidence interval.

## Distribution of practice nurse item numbers claimed at encounters

The 2,438 practice nurse item numbers were recorded among 2,416 encounters. Almost all the practice nurse item numbers recorded were for immunisations (63.5%) and wound treatments (33.3%). Items claimed for practice nurse services to a person with chronic disease accounted for 1.9% and those claimed for practice nurse conduct of cervical smears (with or without preventive checks) for 1.1% of total practice nurse item numbers recorded. Recorded claims for health checks by nurses were very few.

Comparison of the distribution of BEACH practice nurse item numbers recorded and the distribution of the 5.44 million claims made for such items from Medicare in the same data period demonstrated excellent fit (Table 13.2).

**Table 13.2: Distribution of practice nurse item numbers recorded at encounter**

Medicare item number	Short descriptor	Number	Per cent of total	Per cent of Medicare practice nurse claims (n = 5.44 million)
10993	Immunisation	1,549	63.5	63.6
10996	Wound treatment (other than normal aftercare)	812	33.3	31.7
10997 <sup>(a)</sup>	Service provided to a person with a chronic disease by a practice nurse or registered Aboriginal Health Worker	46	1.9	2.7
10994 <sup>(b)</sup>	Cervical smear and preventive checks	16	0.7	
10995 <sup>(b)</sup>	Cervical smear and preventive checks—women 20–69 years, no smear in past 4 years	10	0.4	1.6 (all cervical smears)
10998 <sup>(c)</sup>	Cervical smear	1	0.1	
00711 <sup>(d)</sup>	Health check by a practice nurse or registered Aboriginal Health Worker	3	0.1	0.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>All Medicare practice nurse item numbers</b>	<b>2,438</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

(a) Item number introduced in July 2007.

(b) Item number introduced in November 2006.

(c) Item number introduced in January 2005.

(d) Item number introduced in July 2008.

Source: Medicare health statistics.<sup>63</sup>

Note: there were no recordings of items: 16400—Antenatal services provided by midwives, practice nurses and Aboriginal health workers in rural and remote areas); 10987—Follow-up services provided by a practice nurse of Aboriginal health worker for an Indigenous person who has received a health check; 10999—Cervical smear—women 20–69 years, no smear in past 4 years

## Treatments provided by practice nurses

As reported in Chapter 10, GPs reported 49,048 other treatments at encounter. A further 4,210 injections were given for immunisations by a practise nurse (not reported in Chapter 10). In total 53,258 other treatments were recorded.

At least one practice nurse activity was recorded at 6,052 encounters—6.3% of all encounters. Nurses were involved in the management of 6,281 problems (4.2% of all problems managed by the participating GPs). Practice nurses provided 6,649 other treatments (representing 12.5% of all other treatments recorded at BEACH encounters) at a rate of 6.9 per 100 recorded encounters. The majority (93.3%) of the practice nurse activity was procedural in nature and these procedures represented 30.4% of all procedures recorded. In contrast, clinical treatments accounted for 6.7% of practice nurse activity, but the practice nurse provided less than 2% of all recorded clinical treatments (Table 13.3).

**Table 13.3: Summary of treatments given by practice nurse**

Treatment	Performed/assisted by the practice nurse		Performed by the GP		Total number recorded <sup>(a)</sup>
	Number	Per cent of total	Number	Per cent of total	
Procedural treatments <sup>(a)</sup>	6,202	30.4	14,189	69.6	20,391
Clinical treatments	447	1.4	32,420	98.6	32,867
<b>All other treatments</b>	<b>6,649</b>	<b>12.5</b>	<b>46,609</b>	<b>87.5</b>	<b>53,258</b>

(a) Procedural treatments here include all injections given by a practice nurse for immunisations/vaccinations ( $n = 4,210$ ). These are not included in the summary of the content of encounter in Table 5.1, summary of management in Table 8.1 or in the analyses of other treatments in Chapter 10, because the immunisation/vaccination is already counted as a prescription or GP-supplied medication.

Of the 6,202 procedures done by practice nurses, 37.3% were injections (which were mainly for immunisations/vaccinations) and a further 20.7% were dressing/pressure/compression/tamponade. Together these accounted for more than half of all procedures undertaken by practice nurses in association with the recorded GP encounters. Incision/drainage/aspirations made up 7.2% of procedures done by the nurse, INR tests 6.2%, check-ups 6.1% and electrical tracing 4.3%. Practice nurses also undertook a wide range of other procedural activities in association with the GP encounters. The most common are listed in Table 13.4.

**Table 13.4: Most frequent activities done by a practice nurse**

Activity	Number	Per cent of group <sup>(a)</sup>	Rate per 100 encs involving practice nurse <sup>(a)</sup> ( $n = 6,052$ )	95% LCL	95% UCL
<b>Procedures/tests</b>	<b>6,202</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>94.9</b>	<b>92.9</b>	<b>96.8</b>
Local injection/infiltration*	2,314	37.3	38.2	34.9	41.6
Dressing/pressure/compression/tamponade*	1,283	20.7	21.2	19.2	23.2
Incision/drainage/flushing/aspiration/removal body fluid*	448	7.2	7.4	6.0	8.8
INR test	386	6.2	6.4	4.9	7.9
Check-up-practice nurse*	381	6.1	6.3	4.0	8.6
Electrical tracings*	267	4.3	4.4	3.6	5.2
Excision/removal tissue/biopsy/destruction/debridement/cauterisation*	262	4.2	4.3	3.4	5.2
Repair/fixation-suture/cast/prosth (apply/remove)*	260	4.2	4.3	3.6	5.0
Physical function test*	164	2.6	2.7	2.0	3.4
Urine test*	103	1.7	1.7	1.0	2.4
Other therapeutic procedures/surgery NEC*	83	1.3	1.4	0.8	2.0
Glucose test	58	0.9	1.0	0.6	1.3
Pap smear*	43	0.7	0.7	0.1	1.3
Other diagnostic procedures*	31	0.5	0.5	0.2	0.8
Pregnancy test*	30	0.5	0.5	0.3	0.7
Assist at operation*	29	0.5	0.5	0.2	0.7

(continued)

**Table 13.4 (continued): Most frequent activities done by a practice nurse**

Activity	Number	Per cent of group <sup>(a)</sup>	Rate per 100 encls involving practice nurse <sup>(a)</sup> (n = 6,052)	95% LCL	95% UCL
<b>Clinical treatments</b>	<b>447</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>7.4</b>	<b>6.0</b>	<b>8.8</b>
Other administrative procedure *	140	31.4	2.3	1.6	3
Advice/education—treatment*	57	12.7	0.9	0.5	1.3
Advice/education*	46	10.3	0.8	0.5	1.1
Counselling/advice—nutrition/weight*	44	9.9	0.7	0.4	1.1
Counselling—problem*	28	6.2	0.5	0.2	0.7

(a) Figures do not total 100, as more than one treatment can be performed by a practice nurse at each encounter and only those individual treatments accounting for  $\geq 0.5\%$  of total treatments by practice nurse are included.

\* Includes multiple ICPC-2 or ICPC-2 PLUS codes (see Appendix 4, <[www.aihw.gov.au/publications/index.cfm/subject/19](http://www.aihw.gov.au/publications/index.cfm/subject/19)>).

Note: Encls—encounters; LCL—lower confidence limit; UCL—upper confidence limit; INR—international normalised ratio; NEC—not elsewhere classified; prosth—prosthetic device.

Other administrative procedure (which includes administrative/ documentation work but excludes provision of sickness certificates) was the most frequently recorded clinical activity, accounting for 31.4% of the 447 clinical treatments provided by nurses, followed by advice/education about treatment (12.7%), general advice/education (10.3%), counselling about nutrition or weight (9.9%) and counselling for the problem under management (6.2%) (Table 13.4).

## 13.2 Problems managed with practice nurse involvement

The problems managed most often with the assistance of a practice nurse in association with the consultation were immunisation/vaccination (28.4% of all problems managed with the involvement of a practice nurse), followed by laceration/cut (6.2%) and chronic skin ulcer (5.7%). Practice nurses were involved in the management of a wide range of problems in association with the GP encounters. The most common are listed in Table 13.5.

**Table 13.5: The most common problems managed with the involvement of practice nurse**

Problem managed	Number	Per cent of problems involving PN (n = 6,281)	Rate per 100 encls with recorded PN activity <sup>(a)</sup> (n = 6,052)	95% LCL	95% UCL
Immunisation/vaccination—all*	1,783	28.4	29.5	26.2	32.7
Laceration/cut	388	6.2	6.4	5.5	7.3
Chronic ulcer skin (including varicose ulcer)	355	5.7	5.9	4.9	6.9
General check-up*	221	3.5	3.7	2.9	4.4
Atrial fibrillation/flutter	207	3.3	3.4	2.6	4.3
Diabetes—all*	186	3.0	3.1	2.4	3.7
Malignant neoplasm skin	157	2.5	2.6	1.9	3.3
Excessive ear wax	153	2.4	2.5	2.0	.0

(continued)

**Table 13.5 (continued): The most common problems managed with the involvement of practice nurse**

<b>Problem managed</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Per cent of problems involving PN (n = 6,281)</b>	<b>Rate per 100 encs with recorded PN activity<sup>(a)</sup> (n = 6,052)</b>	<b>95% LCL</b>	<b>95% UCL</b>
Skin infection, post-traumatic	116	1.8	1.9	1.5	2.3
Hypertension*	110	1.8	1.8	1.2	2.4
Vitamin/nutritional deficiency	99	1.6	1.6	1.2	2.1
Blood test, blood immune system	67	1.1	1.1	0.5	1.7
Asthma	66	1.1	1.1	0.7	1.5
Boil/carbuncle	64	1.0	1.1	0.7	1.4
<i>Subtotal</i>	3,972	63.2	—	—	—
<b>Total problems involving practice nurse</b>	<b>6,281</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>103.8</b>	<b>103.1</b>	<b>104.5</b>

(a) Rate of nurse provision of treatment at encounter for selected problem per 100 total encounters in which a practice nurse was involved.

\* Includes multiple ICPC-2 or ICPC-2 PLUS codes (see Appendix 4, <[www.aihw.gov.au/publications/index.cfm/subject/19](http://www.aihw.gov.au/publications/index.cfm/subject/19)>).

Note: PN—practice nurse; encs—encounters; LCL—lower confidence limit; UCL—upper confidence limit.

## 13.3 Discussion

These results suggest that many GPs are claiming Medicare items for practice nurses to provide immunisations and, to a lesser degree, dressings, but are rarely using the cervical smear/preventive check practice nurse item numbers. The health check item number was only available to GPs for 4 months of the 2008–09 BEACH year so had low usage in both BEACH and the MBS for that data year.

The following section extrapolates these results to national estimates and considers them in light of Medicare claims data.<sup>63</sup>

- Extrapolation of the 6,183 encounters involving a practice nurse (6.4% of all encounters) to the 112.3 million GP consultations claimed through Medicare in 2008–09 suggest that there were 7.2 million encounters nationally that involved the practice nurse.
- Extrapolation of the 6,649 activities ascribed to the practice nurse in BEACH (6.9 per 100 encounters) to a national estimate suggest there were 7.7 million such activities conducted as part of GP–patient encounters nationally.
- Extrapolation of the 2,438 practice nurse items claimed (at a rate of 2.5 per 100 BEACH encounters) to national estimates suggests that GPs claimed 2.8 million practice nurse items for activities the nurses undertook in relation to the GP–patient encounters.<sup>63</sup>

These data suggest that nationally in 2008–09 there were:

- about 4.9 million (7.7 million activities minus 2.8 million claims) practice nurse clinical activities undertaken in association with GP–patient encounters that were not claimable or not claimed through Medicare.
- about 2.6 million (5.4 million claims minus the estimated 2.8 million that were for activities associated with the encounters) practice nurse items claimed for practice nurse activities conducted independently of direct GP–patient consultations (i.e. services provided separately from the encounter, and therefore not reported by GPs in BEACH encounter records.)

There is no means by which we can estimate the number of practice nurse clinical activities undertaken independently of the GP–patient encounters for which no claim was made, either because the activity did not qualify for Medicare payment, or because the practice simply failed to claim.

Comparison of the services provided by practice nurses (Table 13.4) with the common problems for which these services were provided (Table 13.5) suggests that about three-quarters of the local injections/infiltrations recorded as given by practice nurses were for immunisations, and about one-third were for other types of injections and therefore not eligible to be claimed through Medicare. Table 13.2 suggests that for only 1,549 (86.9%) of the 1,783 immunisation/vaccination problems involving practice nurses (shown in Table 13.5), a practice nurse item number was claimable. Perhaps the remaining 13% were for vaccinations that do not qualify under the Medicare claims guidelines.

Table 13.4 shows that nurses dealt with 1,283 dressing/pressure/compression/tamponades in conjunction with the GP encounter, but only 812 claims were made for Medicare payment for wound treatment (Table 13.2). This suggests that about 63% of the dressings recorded for practice nurses were claimable under Medicare. Some of the dressings may be follow-up encounters where the follow-up treatment (aftercare) is included in the initial Medicare claim (claimed in the past), and may therefore not be claimable for the practice nurse.

It is clear that there was a wide range of other activities undertaken by practice nurses at the BEACH encounters which did not qualify for Medicare re-imburement.

## 13.4 Changes in practice nurse activity, 2005–06 to 2008–09

A comparison of practice nurse activity from 2005–06 to 2008–09 is provided in the 10-year summary report *General practice activity in Australia 1999–00 to 2008–09: 10 year data tables*.<sup>1</sup>

In summary:

- the number of practice nurse item numbers claimed per 100 GP–patient encounters increased significantly from 1.7 items per 100 encounters in 2005–06 to 2.5 per 100 in 2008–09.

Irrespective of whether or not a claim was made for a practice nurse item at the encounter:

- encounters involving a practice nurse as a proportion of all recorded encounters increased significantly from 4.2% in 2005–06 to 6.4% in 2008–09, an increase of more than 50%
- the number of procedures (including tests) undertaken by practice nurses at GP–patient encounters rose significantly by 55%
- between 2006–07 and 2008–09, practice nurse INR tests increased from 1.8 per 100 encounters in which they were involved to 6.4 per 100, almost a threefold increase
- practice nurse check-ups went up by about 50%, suggesting that nationally they did about 250,000 more check-ups in relation to GP–patient encounters in 2008–09 than in 2006–07
- administrative procedures (excluding provision of sickness certificates) done by practice nurses at GP–patient encounters increased from 0.7 to 2.3 per 100 practice nurse encounters, a threefold increase.