

1 Introduction

This publication is the 26th book in the series from the BEACH program. This report includes summary results from the most recent 10 years of the program, from 1999–00 to 2008–09 inclusive.

BEACH is a continuous national study of general practice activity conducted by the Australian General Practice Statistics and Classification Centre (AGPSCC). The AGPSCC is a collaborating unit of the Family Medicine Research Centre (FMRC) at the University of Sydney and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). BEACH is currently supported financially by government instrumentalities and private industry (see Acknowledgments).

BEACH began in April 1998, and at the end of its 11th year (March 2009) the BEACH database included records for almost 1.1 million encounters from 10,885 participants representing more than 7,824 individual general practitioners (almost half of the practising recognised GP population in Australia).

Annual results from the BEACH study are published each year. The most recent of these, released in parallel with this book, is *General practice activity in Australia 2008–09*.¹ This book brings the last 10 years of data together to provide a reference document for those interested in changes that have occurred over the decade 1999–00 to 2008–09 in the GP workforce, the patients consulting them, the problems managed and the treatments provided by GPs.

Like the rest of the developed world, Australia has an ageing population – from 1998 to 2007 there was about a 1% decrease in the proportion of the population aged less than 15 years and an extra 1% aged 65 years and over.² As life expectancy improves, people are living longer with disease, so that a greater part of the GP workload will involve management of older patients with multiple chronic diseases.

The highest annual average number of Medicare GP items of service claimed per head of population was in 1998–99, at 5.5 visits per head. Average attendance then steadily decreased to a low of 4.87 visits per head in 2003–04. This decreasing attendance rate raised questions about equity of access, leading the Australian Government to make substantial changes to laws governing Medicare benefits in 2004 and 2005. General practice attendance rates are now approaching the 1998–99 levels.³

The structure of this report follows the usual approach of the annual BEACH reports. 10 years of results are provided for the GPs, the patients and the problems managed, together with an overview of management, specific chapters for each management action and a chapter on practice nurse activity. Changes in the prevalence of some risk factors among patients at GP encounters are also presented.

Each chapter contains an overview of the section (including definitions where relevant), the results tables and a brief description of each table. In the tables, statistically significant changes in results between 1999–00 (or 2000–01 if relevant) and 2008–09 are marked. The national effect of significant change can be estimated by extrapolating the BEACH results to all GP Medicare claimed encounters. The method adopted for extrapolation of the effect of a change is described in Section 2.8. Examples of extrapolation of a measured change are also provided in each chapter, from Chapter 5 to 13 inclusive. The reader can apply this method to any significant change in the data presented, to gain an estimate of the size of the national change in frequency of an event, occurring as a result of changes in general practice.

In this report we do not investigate changes in (for example) the GP use of medications, referrals and investigations in the management of a specific problem, or changes in the problems presented by selected groups of patients. Such work was undertaken for morbidities classed in the National Health Priority Areas⁴ and published in July 2009 in *General practice in Australia, health priorities and policies 1998 to 2008*.⁵

1.1 Background—general practice in Australia

- In December 2008 the estimated population of Australia was 21.64 million people.⁶
- GPs are the first port of call in the Australian health care system.
- There were 97 full-time equivalent practising primary care practitioners per 100,000 people in Australia in 2006.⁷
- About 88% of the Australian population visited a GP at least once in 2005–06.⁸
- Payment is on a fee-for-service system, there being no patient lists or registration.
- People are free to visit multiple practitioners and multiple practices of their choice.
- There is a universal medical insurance scheme (managed by Medicare Australia), which covers all or most of an individual's costs for a GP visit.
- In 2008–09, 112 million general practitioner items of services were paid by Medicare Australia at an average rate of more than five visits per person per year.⁹ GPs provided an estimated additional 5.4 million services paid for by other funders (such as workers compensation, state government) or not charged for at all.¹⁰ In 2008–09, the primary cost to Medicare for GP items was over \$4.5 billion.⁹

BEACH gives us some understanding of the content of these encounters and of the services and treatments that GPs provide. The BEACH program aims to:

- provide a reliable and valid data collection process for general practice that is responsive to the ever-changing needs of information users
- establish an ongoing database of GP–patient encounter information
- assess patient risk factors and health states, and the relationship these factors have with health service activity.

Users of the BEACH data might wish to consolidate information from multiple national data sources. Integration of data from multiple sources can provide a more comprehensive picture of the health and health care of the Australian community. It is therefore important that readers are aware of how the BEACH data differ from those drawn from other sources. A summary of differences between those data collected in BEACH compared with those in the Medicare Benefits Schedule, the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme and the National Health survey is available in *General practice activity in Australia 2008–09* (see Section 1.3).¹

The BEACH program has generated many papers on a wide range of topics in journals and professional magazines. Appendix 3 lists all published material from BEACH.