

4. Morbidity

Most childhood sickness takes the form of mild illnesses that are usually treated by parents themselves or a general practitioner. Hospital utilisation accounts for a small part of health services provided to children and is usually for more severe types of conditions. Children's use of health services depends not only on the state of their health but also on their carer's knowledge and attitudes and the availability and affordability of the services.

This chapter provides an overview of illness in children. Data on the extent and main causes of morbidity in children are derived from three sources: the 1995 ABS National Health Survey (NHS) prevalence of illness data; the Bettering the Evaluation and Care of Health (BEACH) Program which provides information on children's visits to general practitioners; and the AIHW National Hospital Morbidity Database which provides information on hospital admissions for children.

Prevalence of illnesses

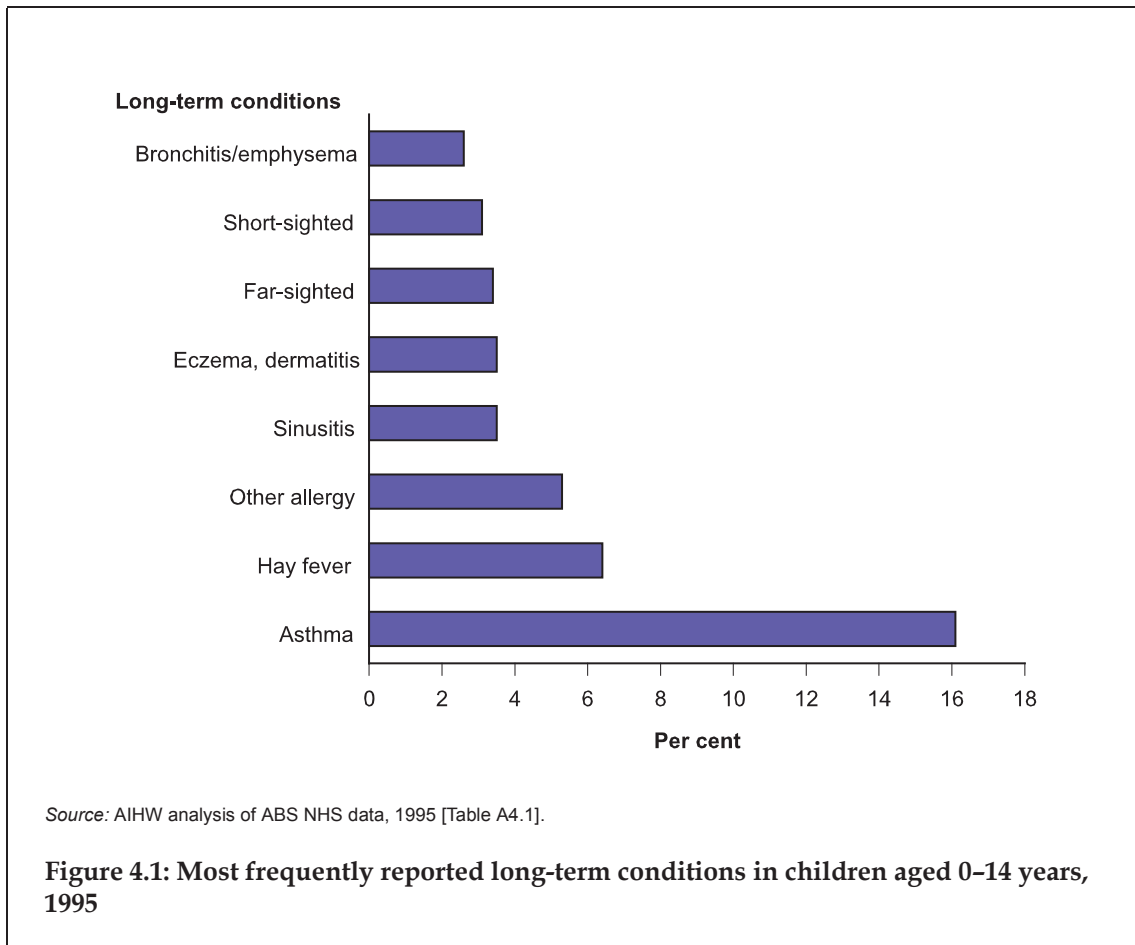
Information was gathered from the 1995 ABS NHS on current conditions at the time of the survey, including recent and long-term, minor and more serious conditions. Recent conditions were defined as those experienced in the 2 weeks prior to interview, while long-term conditions were defined as having lasted, or being expected to last, for 6 months or more.

Table 4.1: Proportion of children aged 0-14 years with reported recent and long-term conditions, 1995 (per cent)

Age (years)	Recent conditions		Long-term conditions		Recent or long-term conditions	
	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females
<1	69	68	17	16	71	71
1-4	57	54	39	29	66	61
5-9	53	55	48	47	67	67
10-14	53	56	52	53	70	72
0-14	55	56	45	42	68	67

Source: AIHW analysis of ABS NHS data, 1995.

- Approximately two-thirds of children aged 0-14 years were reported to have a recent or long-term condition.
- Recent conditions were more prevalent than long-term conditions in all age groups and in both sexes.
- The proportion of children with recent conditions tended to decline with age. In contrast, the proportion of children with long-term conditions tended to increase with age.
- Slightly more girls than boys were reported to have a recent condition, while the opposite was true for long-term conditions.



- Asthma was the most frequently reported long-term condition, reported for 16% of all children. Asthma was most prevalent among children aged 5-14 years.
- Hay fever was the second most frequently reported long-term condition. Prevalence of hay fever was also higher among children aged 5-14 years.
- Asthma, hay fever, other allergies and eczema, all of which are related to allergic reactions, made up nearly one-third of all reported long-term conditions.
- Far- and short-sightedness were reported for approximately 7% of children. These conditions were most common in children aged 10-14 years.

The most commonly reported recent condition was the common cold, reported for 10% of children. Younger children were more likely to have suffered from a cold (13% of those under 1 year and 14% of those aged 1-4 years). Asthma was the second most frequently reported condition (9% of children), with other common conditions being dental problems (7%) and cough or sore throat (5%).

Consultations with general practitioners

This section examines illness in children aged 0–14 years managed by general practitioners (GPs). The data source is the BEACH Program which, in a rolling survey, samples around 1,000 general practitioners each year on the details of 100 consecutive consultations per GP. It includes information on the reasons patients present, as well as the problems managed, referrals, treatments, tests and investigations ordered and procedures carried out.

Profile of patients

Table 4.2: Summary of characteristics of children aged 0–14 years seen by general practitioners, April 2000–March 2001

Patient characteristics	Number	Per cent
Sex		
Males	7,219	51.7
Females	6,751	48.3
Age		
<1 year	2,098	14.9
1–4 years	5,310	37.7
5–14 years	6,695	47.5
Health card status		
Holds a Health Care Card	3,921	27.8
Holds a Department of Veterans' Affairs card	11	0.1
Background		
Non-English-speaking background	882	6.3
Aboriginal	205	1.5
Torres Strait Islander	21	0.2
Consultation history		
Seen previously	12,600	89.3
New to practice	1,504	10.7
Total consultations	14,103	..

.. Not applicable.

Note: 134 consultations were missing information on sex.

Source: BEACH Survey, April 2000–March 2001.

- Between April 2000 and March 2001, of the 99,307 consultations in general practice surveyed, there were 14,103 (14%) consultations with children aged less than 15 years in the sample. This extrapolates to a total of about 15 million consultations per year nationally. GP consultations with children were divided almost equally between girls and boys. Just under half were for those aged 5–14 years, while children aged under 1 and 1–4 years accounted for 14.9% and 37.7% of the consultations, respectively.
- Just over 6% of these consultations were with children from a non-English-speaking background, while 1.5% were with children who were identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Indigenous children in the BEACH survey are subject to under-identification, either through some GPs not asking about Indigenous status, by not recording the response or non-identification by the patients (AIHW 2001).

- Just over a quarter of the consultations (27.8%) were for children in families that held a Health Care Card.
- Around 90% of consultations were with children who had been seen at the practice before.

Nature of consultation

Table 4.3: Type of consultation by general practitioners for children aged 0–14 years, April 2000–March 2001

Type of consultation	Number	Rate per 100 consultations
Medicare claimable	12,167	98.0
Standard surgery consultation	11,248	90.6
Long surgery consultation	330	2.7
Short surgery consultation	283	2.3
Prolonged surgery consultation	9.0	0.07
Home visits	132	1.1
Other items	153	1.23
Hospital	9	0.07
Nursing home	3	0.02
Non-Medicare claimable	245	2.0
Total consultations	14,103	..

.. Not applicable.

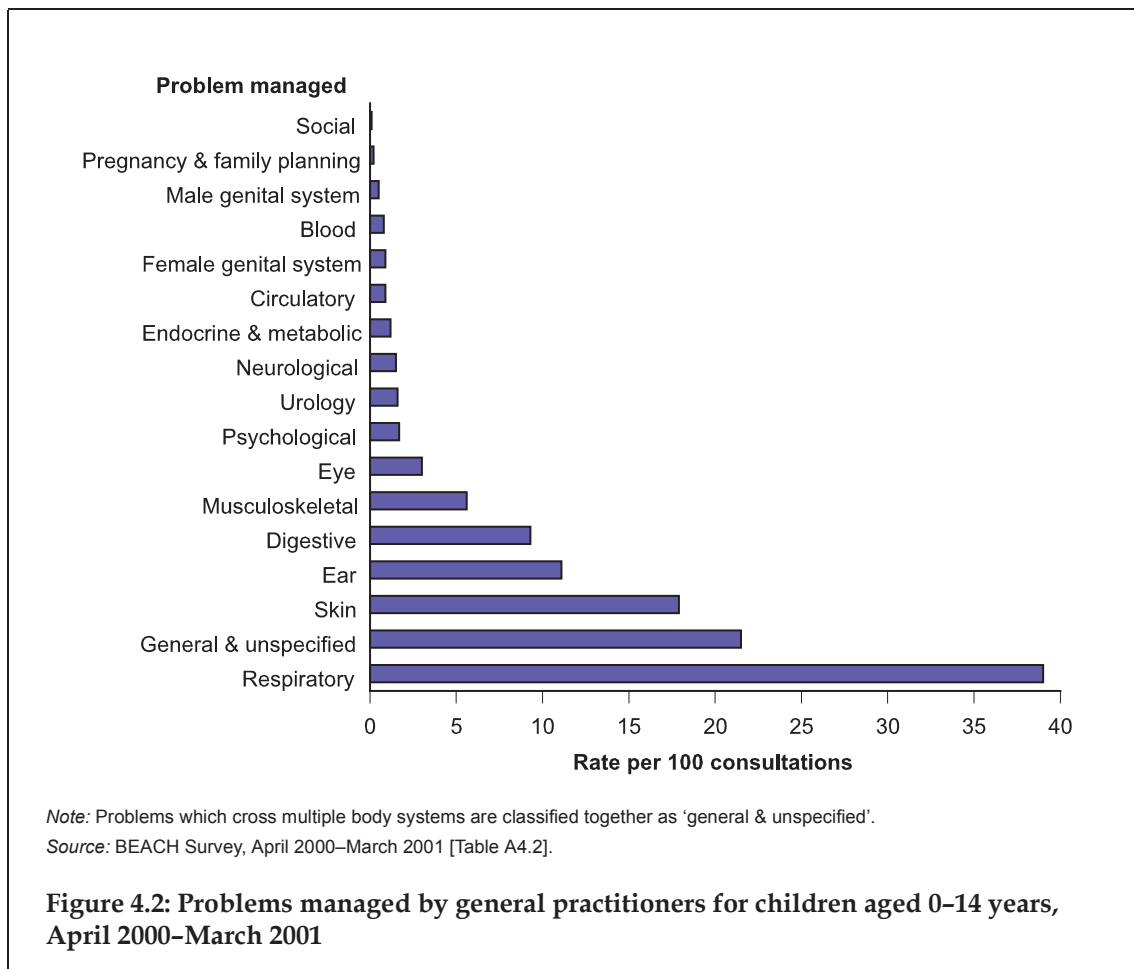
Note: There were 1,692 encounters for which data was missing which are included in total consultations.

Source: BEACH Survey, April 2000–March 2001.

- Almost all consultations (98 per 100 consultations) were claimable through Medicare and most were surgery consultations. Less than 2 per 100 consultations were home visits.

Problems managed

There were a total of 16,468 problems managed in these children's consultations. Of these, just over half (8,443 or 51%) were new problems. The types of problems managed during general practice consultations according to main problem groups (ICPC-2 classification chapters) are shown in Figure 4.2.



- Problems related to the respiratory system were the most common problems managed by GPs, at a rate of 39.0 per 100 consultations.
- The second most frequent problem group was skin problems (17.9 per 100 consultations), followed by those related to the ear (11.1), the digestive (9.3) and musculoskeletal systems (5.6), and the eye (3.0). Psychological (1.7) and urological problems (1.6) were also relatively common. All remaining types of problems were managed at a rate of less than 1.5 per 100 consultations each.

The most frequent specific conditions managed by general practitioners are shown in Table 4.4.

Table 4.4: Top 10 problems managed by general practitioners for children aged 0–14 years, April 2000–March 2001

Problem managed	Number	Per cent of total problems managed
Acute upper respiratory tract infection	2,545	15.5
Immunisation—all ^(a)	1,494	9.1
Acute otitis media/myringitis	1,065	6.5
Asthma	819	5.0
Viral disease, other/NOS ^(b)	620	3.8
Tonsillitis ^(a)	610	3.7
Acute bronchitis/bronchiolitis	519	3.2
Dermatitis, contact/allergic	474	2.9
Conjunctivitis, infectious	256	1.6
Fracture ^(a)	242	1.5
<i>Top 10 problems managed</i>	<i>8,643</i>	<i>52.5</i>
Total managed	16,468	100.0

(a) Includes multiple ICPC-2 codes.

(b) NOS: not otherwise specified.

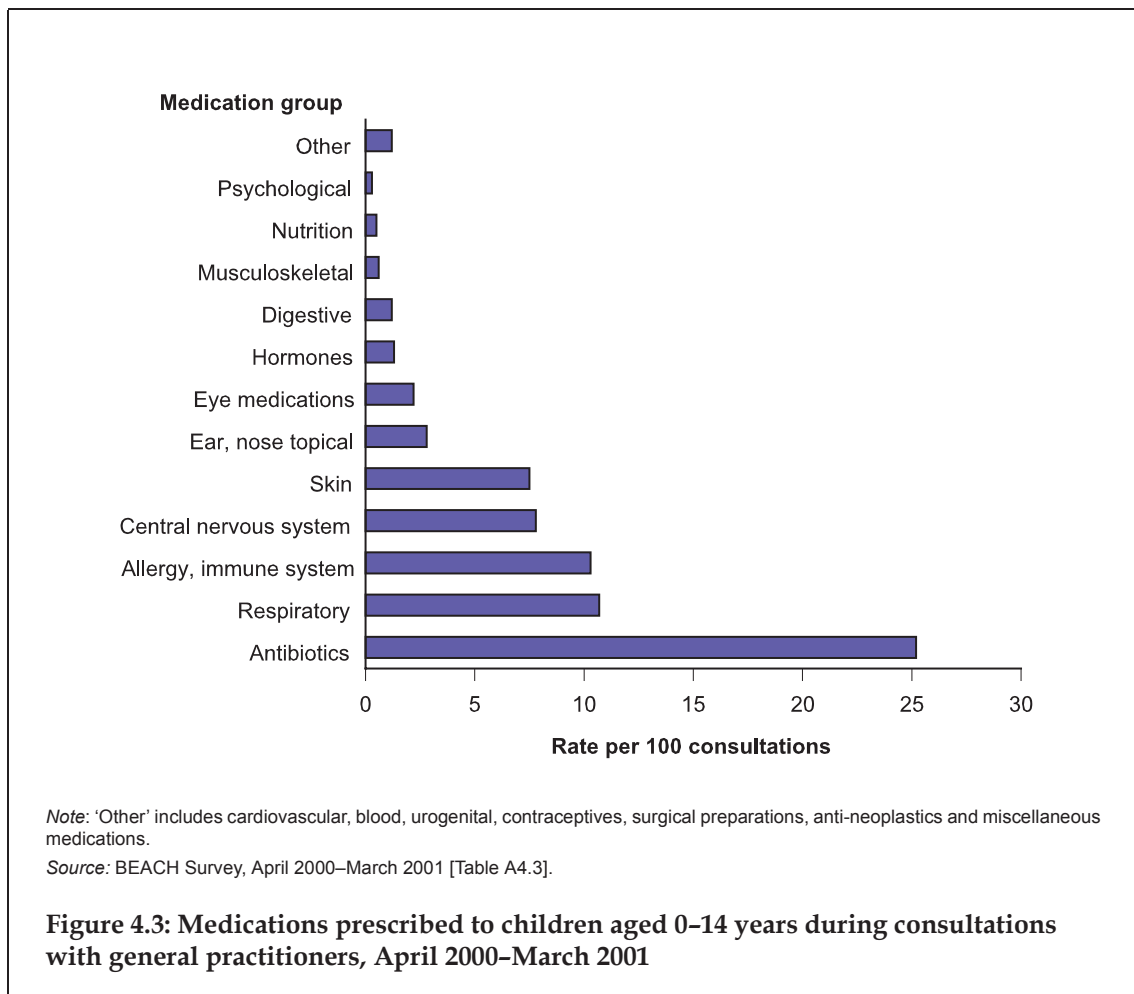
Note: Total problems managed are more than total consultations because more than one problem can be dealt with per consultation.

Source: BEACH Survey, April 2000–March 2001.

- Acute upper respiratory tract infections made up 15.5% of all problems managed by GPs.
- Immunisations were also common, accounting for 9.1% of all problems managed.
- Acute ear infections (6.5%), and respiratory conditions such as asthma and bronchiolitis were also commonly managed problems (5.0% and 3.2%, respectively).

Medications

The medications prescribed, advised or supplied by GPs for children provide another view of childhood illness in Australia. Medications were prescribed at a rate of 99.3 per 100 consultations. The total number of medications for children over the 12-month period in the survey was 14,007. This extrapolates to an estimated 15 million medications prescribed, advised or supplied for children by GPs each year. Of these medications in the BEACH Survey, 10,094 were prescribed (at a rate of 71.6 per 100 consultations), 2,559 were advised for over-the-counter purchase (18.2 per 100) and 1,352 were supplied by the GP (9.6 per 100). The distribution of prescribed medications (per cent) by group is presented in Figure 4.3.



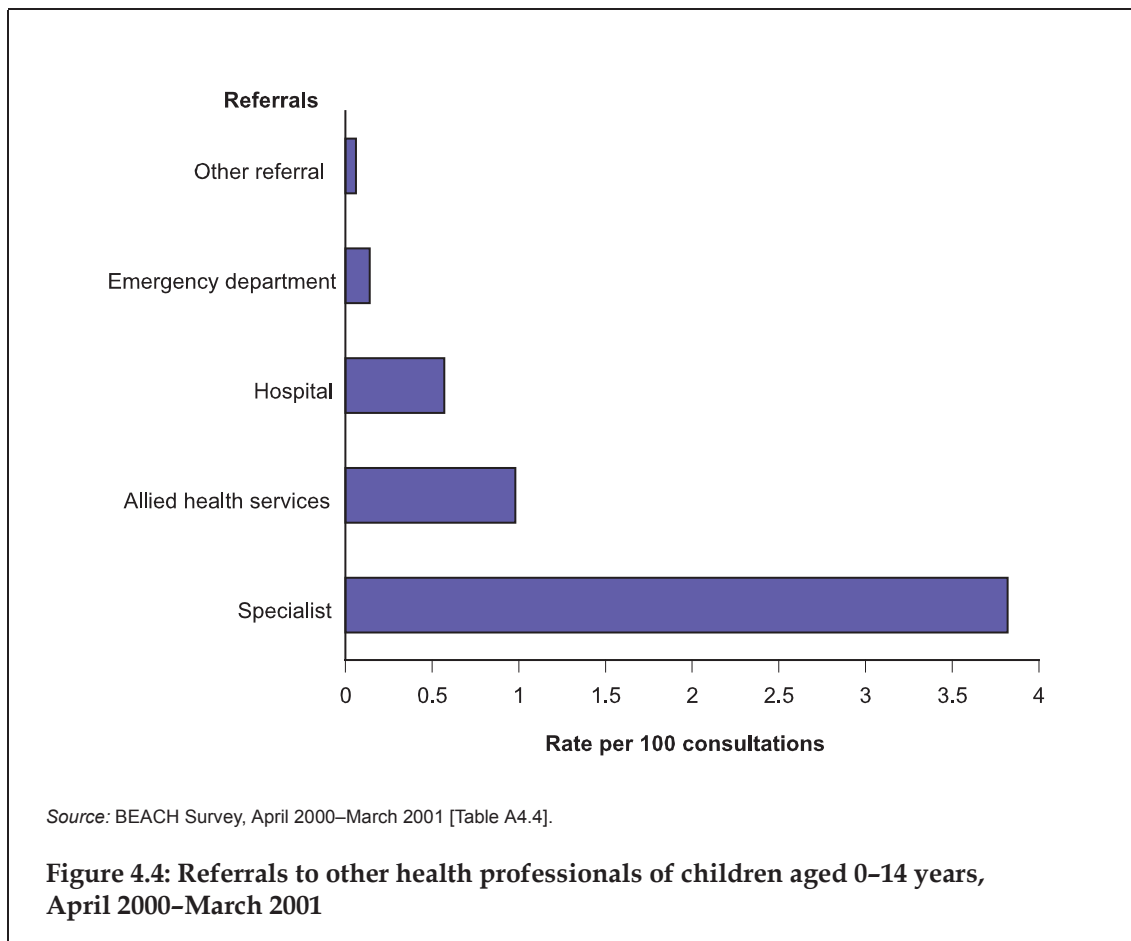
- Antibiotics were the most commonly prescribed medication (25.2 per 100 consultations), representing 35% of all prescriptions. Broad-spectrum penicillin was the antibiotic most commonly prescribed, representing almost a half of all prescribed antibiotics (45%).
- Medications for the treatment of respiratory illness including asthma and bronchitis were the second most common group prescribed, representing 15% of all prescriptions.
- Vaccines made up 13% of total medications, while medications for problems of the central nervous system and the skin each made up 11%. The remaining groups each represented less than 5% of medications prescribed.

Clinical and procedural treatments

In about one-third of the visits to a GP by children (30%), 'other clinical treatment', including advice, education or counselling, was offered. In just over 7% of the visits, a minor surgical procedure or the application of a dressing was performed.

Referrals and admissions

During the 12-month survey period, there were 785 referrals to other health professionals, including hospitals and emergency departments, representing a referral rate of just under 6 per 100 consultations. The health professionals to whom children were referred are shown in Figure 4.4.



- In about 4 per 100 consultations, children were referred by the GP to a medical specialist. These referrals made up 69% of all referrals.
- Other referrals included those to allied health services (1.0 per 100 consultations), hospitals (0.6), and emergency departments (0.1).