

Primary health care in Australia

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About primary health care

Primary health care is the entry level to the health system and, as such, is usually a person's first encounter with the health system. It includes a broad range of activities and services, from health promotion and prevention, to treatment and management of acute and chronic conditions. This report includes sources of Primary Health Network (PHN) data, expenditure, delivery of primary health care services including the scope and patient experience.

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In Australia, primary health care is typically the first contact an individual with a health concern has with the health system. Primary health care covers health care that is not related to a hospital visit, including health promotion, prevention, early intervention, treatment of acute conditions, and management of chronic conditions [1].

Delivery of primary health care services

Primary health care services are delivered in settings such as general practices, community health centres, allied health practices, and via communication technologies such as telehealth and video consultations. General practitioners (GPs), nurses, nurse practitioners, allied health professionals, midwives, pharmacists, dentists, and Aboriginal health practitioners are all considered primary health care professionals.

Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2014-15 Patient Experience Survey showed:

- more than 4 in 5 people (83%) had consulted a GP at least once in the previous 12 months
- about 1 in 11 (8.7%) saw an after-hours GP in the previous 12 months
- almost 1 in 2 (49%) saw a dental professional in the previous 12 months
- almost 1 in 5 (18%) saw 3 or more health professionals for the same health condition [2].

The scope and nature of primary health care are wide-ranging:

- In 2014-15, there were **139 million** non-referred encounters with GPs claimed through Medicare—from a total of 335 million out-of-hospital services. Other out-of-hospital Medicare services included obstetrics, anaesthetics and pathology [3].
- In 2015-16, there were **117 million** medications prescribed by GPs and a further 13 million medications provided directly to patients [4].
- In 2014-15, there were **3.5 million** episodes of care delivered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific services. For more information, see [Indigenous Australians](#).

In contrast, Australian public hospitals provided around 35 million outpatient services in 2014-15. Over the same period of time, public hospitals also provided 10.2 million episodes of admitted care (hospitalisations), and responded to almost 7.4 million emergency department presentations [5].

The Australian Government funds Medicare—a universal public insurance scheme—to provide free or subsidised treatment by health professionals. Access to bulk-billed GP attendances (consultations for which no co-payment is charged to the patient) is a component of the Medicare system. In 2014-15, 83% of non-referred GP attendances were bulk-billed [3].

Spending on primary care

About \$56 billion of total health expenditure was spent on primary health care in 2014-15 [6]. This is 35% of total health funding, similar to spending on hospital services (39%).

Primary health care expenditure is made up of:

- unreferral medical services (20% of primary health care expenditure)
- benefit paid pharmaceuticals (17%)
- all other medications (18%)
- dental services (17%),
- community health and other (14%),
- other health practitioners (9.8%), and
- public health (4.2%).

For more information, see [Expenditure](#).

References

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4. Britt H, Miller GC, Bayram C, Henderson J, Valenti L et. al. 2016. *General practice activity in Australia 2015-16*. General Practice series no. 40. Sydney: Sydney University Press.
5. AIHW 2017. [Hospitals](#). Viewed 1 March 2017.
6. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2016. [Health expenditure Australia 2014-15](#). Health and welfare expenditure series no. 57. Cat. no. HWE 67. Canberra: AIHW.

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