

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 November 2004, four 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 recording form for the 2005-06 BEACH year was amended to allow the capture of this information.

- 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 gave 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, <www.aihw.gov.au/publications/index.cfm/subject/19>.

In November 2007, a new Medicare item number was added for practice nurse services. This item, 10997, was only available to BEACH 2007-08 participants between November 2007 and March 2008 inclusive. The seven practice nurse Medicare items available during the 2007-08 BEACH data period are listed with a short description in Table 13.1.⁶¹

This section investigates:

- the distribution of the Medicare items claimed for practice nurses (the total number of these items was reported as one group 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 treatments (other than medications) 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 versus practice nurse activity

Practice nurses were involved in 5,712 GP–patient encounters, assisting in the management of 5,909 problems. However, only 2,073 practice nurse item numbers were recorded as claimable from Medicare, and practice nurse items accounted for 2.0% of all Medicare items recorded in 2007–08 (Table 5.5). At two-thirds (65.3%) of encounters at which the practice nurse performed a clinical or procedural activity, no practice nurse item number was recorded as claimable (results not tabled).

Distribution of practice nurse item numbers claimed at encounters

GPs recorded 2,073 practice nurse item numbers at 2,047 encounters (Table 5.5). Almost all the practice nurse item numbers recorded for the BEACH encounters were for immunisations/vaccinations (64.1%) and wound treatments (34.4%). Items claimed for practice nurse conduct of cervical smears and/or preventive checks were very few (17 in total), as were services provided to a person with chronic disease, each accounting for less than 1% of all recorded practice nurse item numbers (Table 13.1).

Table 13.1: Distribution of practice nurse item numbers recorded at encounter

Medicare item number	Short descriptor	Number	Per cent of total
10993	Immunisation	1,330	64.1
10994 ^(a)	Cervical smear and preventive checks	4	0.2
10995 ^(a)	Cervical smear and preventive checks—women 20–69 years, no smear in past 4 years	2	0.1
10996	Wound treatment (other than normal aftercare)	713	34.4
10997 ^(b)	Service provided to a person with a chronic disease by a practice nurse or registered Aboriginal Health Worker	14	0.7
10998 ^(c)	Cervical smear	5	0.3
10999 ^(c)	Cervical smear—women 20–69 years, no smear in past 4 years	6	0.3
Total	All Medicare practice nurse item numbers	2,073	100.0

(a) Item number introduced in November 2006.

(b) Item number introduced in November 2007.

(c) Item numbers introduced in November 2004 but broadened in 2006, so they are now not limited to services in rural areas.

Treatments provided by practice nurses

As reported in Chapter 10, GPs reported 49,130 other treatments. A further 3,634 injections were given for immunisation (not reported in Chapter 10). In total 52,764 other treatments were recorded.

At least one practice nurse activity was recorded at 5,712 encounters—6.0% of all encounters. Nurses were involved in the management of 5,909 problems (4.1% of all problems managed

by the participating GPs). Practice nurses provided 6,283 other treatments, representing 11.9% of all other treatments recorded at BEACH encounters. The majority (84.7%) of the practice nurse activity was procedural in nature. These procedures represented 28.9% of all procedures recorded. Other investigations conducted in the surgery accounted for 8.3% of practice nurse activity and represented 41.5% of all other investigations undertaken during BEACH encounters. In contrast, while clinical treatments accounted for 7.0% of practice nurse activity, the practice nurse provided less than 2% of all clinical treatments (Table 13.2).

Table 13.2: Summary of treatments given by practice nurse

Treatment	Performed/assisted by the practice nurse		Performed by the GP		Total number recorded ^(a)
	Number	Per cent of total	Number	Per cent of total	
Procedural treatments ^(a)	5,322	28.9	13,065	71.1	18,387
Clinical treatments	440	1.3	32,681	98.7	33,121
Other investigations	521	41.5	735	58.5	1,256
All other treatments	6,283	11.9	46,481	88.1	52,764

(a) Procedural treatments here includes all injections for immunisations/vaccinations ($n = 3,634$). 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 5,322 procedures done by practice nurses, 40.4% were injections (which were mainly for immunisations/vaccinations) and a further 22.3% were dressing/pressure/compression/tamponade. Together these accounted for more than half of all procedures undertaken by practice nurses. Incision/drainage/aspirations made up 7.3%, and check-ups 6.5% of procedures done by the nurse. Practice nurses also undertook a wide range of other procedural activities in association with the GP encounters. The most common are listed in Table 13.3.

Administrative and documentation work was the most frequently recorded clinical treatment, accounting for 25.7% of the clinical treatments provided by nurses, followed by general advice/education (18.6%), advice about treatment (7.6%), counselling about the problem under management (7.2%) and counselling about nutrition or weight (6.7%).

The most common other investigations performed by the nurse were electrical tracings (such as electrocardiogram) (56.8% of other investigations) and physical function tests (38.5%) (Table 13.3).

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 (28.5% of all problems managed with the involvement of a practice nurse), followed by laceration/cut (5.8%) and chronic skin ulcer (5.7%) (Table 13.4).

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 13.4.

Table 13.3: Most frequent treatments provided by practice nurses

Treatment	Number	Per cent of group ^(a)	Rate per 100 encs involving practice nurse (n = 5,712) ^(a)	95% LCL	95% UCL
Procedural treatments	5,323	100.0	93.2	91.5	94.8
Local injection/infiltration*	2,153	40.4	37.7	34.7	40.7
Dressing/pressure/compression/tamponade*	1,185	22.3	20.7	18.7	22.8
Incision/drainage/flushing/aspiration/removal body fluid*	387	7.3	6.8	5.6	7.9
Check-up—practice nurse*	348	6.5	6.1	4.8	7.4
Repair/fixation-suture/cast/prosthetic device (apply/remove)*	285	5.3	5.0	4.2	5.7
INR test	282	5.3	4.9	3.6	6.2
Excision/removal issue/biopsy/destruction/debride/cauterise*	278	5.2	4.9	3.8	5.9
Urine test*	121	2.3	2.1	1.3	3.0
Other procedures/minor surgery NEC*	84	1.6	1.5	1.0	2.0
Glucose test	55	1.0	1.0	0.7	1.3
Physical medicine/rehabilitation*	35	0.7	0.6	0.2	1.1
Pregnancy test*	30	0.6	0.5	0.3	0.8
Pap smear	30	0.6	0.5	0.3	0.8
Clinical treatments	440	100.0	7.7	6.2	9.2
Other admin/document*	113	25.7	2.0	1.4	2.6
Advice/education*	82	18.6	1.4	0.8	2.1
Advice/education—treatment*	33	7.6	0.6	0.4	0.8
Counselling—problem*	32	7.2	0.6	0.3	0.8
Counselling/advice—nutrition/weight*	29	6.7	0.5	0.1	0.9
Other investigations	521	100.0	9.1	7.5	10.8
Electrical tracings*	296	56.8	5.2	4.3	6.1
Physical function tests*	201	38.5	3.5	2.3	4.7

(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 treatment accounting for >= 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>).

Note: Encs—encounters; LCL—lower confidence limit; UCL—upper confidence limit; NEC—not elsewhere classified.

Table 13.4: The most common problems managed with the involvement of practice nurse

Problem managed	Number	Per cent of problems involving practice nurse (n = 5,909)	Rate per 100 encs involving practice nurse ^(a) (n = 5,712)	95% LCL	95% UCL
Immunisation/vaccination—all*	1,684	28.5	29.5	26.7	32.2
Laceration/cut	345	5.8	6.0	5.0	7.0
Chronic ulcer skin (including varicose ulcer)	266	4.5	4.7	3.7	5.6
General check-up*	244	4.1	4.3	3.1	5.4
Diabetes—all*	173	2.9	3.0	2.4	3.7
Atrial fibrillation/flutter	162	2.7	2.8	2.0	3.6
Excessive ear wax	160	2.7	2.8	2.2	3.4
Malignant neoplasm skin	146	2.5	2.6	1.8	3.3
Hypertension*	100	1.7	1.8	1.2	2.3
Skin infection, post-traumatic	90	1.5	1.6	1.0	2.1
Asthma	70	1.2	1.2	0.9	1.6
Abrasion/scratch/blister	66	1.1	1.2	0.6	1.7
Repair/fixate-suture/cast/prosthetic device (apply/remove)*	65	1.1	1.1	0.8	1.5
Burns/scalds	63	1.1	1.1	0.8	1.4
Total problems involving practice nurse	5,909	100.0	103.4	102.7	104.2

(a) Rate of nurse provision of treatment for selected problem per 100 total encounters.

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

Note: Encs—encounters; LCL—lower confidence limit; UCL—upper confidence limit.

13.2 Discussion

These results suggest that many GPs are using practice nurses to provide immunisations/vaccinations and, to a lesser degree, for dressings. However, they also suggest very little use of the cervical smear/preventive check practice nurse item numbers.

If extrapolated, the 2,047 encounters at which a practice nurse item number was recorded as claimable (at 2.0% of Medicare-claimable encounters in BEACH) (Table 5.4) to the 111 million general practice Medicare items claimed (including practice nurse items)¹, represent an estimated 2.2 million claims were made from Medicare for practice nurse services associated with GP consultations. The MBS claims data for practice nurse item numbers for the 2007–08 BEACH year show that 4.6 million practice nurse items were claimed for that period.¹ This suggests that about 2.4 million services were provided and claimed for practice nurse activities conducted independently of direct GP–patient consultations.

The MBS data suggest that 62.2% of the claims were for immunisation/vaccinations (item 10993), 34.6% were for wound dressings (item 10996) and only 1.4% were for the cervical smear/preventive check items (10994, 10995, 10998, 10999).⁶² This compares with BEACH data of 64.1% of the claims being for immunisations/vaccinations, 34.4% for wound dressings and 0.8% for cervical smear/preventive check items. This suggests that more of the wound management and cervical smear/preventive checks are being done (and claimed for) through direct appointments with the practice nurse, as directed by the GP.

In 2005–06, the research team suggested that the low uptake of practice nurse items covering cervical smears may have been partly due to the geographic limitations placed on these item numbers at that time, and on the difficulty of separating the cervical smear from the total clinical activity of a well woman check. These checks often involve (in addition to a cervical smear) a pelvic examination and a breast check, and may also involve discussion of sexual issues and contraception, which in turn may result in prescription of medication. Practice nurses cannot prescribe medication.

The geographic limitations, and the broadening of the cervical smear item numbers in November 2006 removed some of these limitations. But these actions appear to have had little effect on uptake rate of these item numbers.

Comparison of the services provided by practice nurses (Table 13.3) with the common problems for which these services were provided (Table 13.4) suggests that about 78% of the local injections/infiltrations recorded for practice nurses were given for immunisation/vaccinations, and about 22% were for other types of injections and therefore not eligible to be claimed through Medicare. Table 13.1 suggests that only 1,330 (79%) of the estimated 1,684 immunisations/vaccinations involving the practice nurses were actually claimed through Medicare.

Table 13.3 shows that nurses dealt with 1,185 dressing/pressure/compression/tamponades in conjunction with the GP encounter, but only 713 claims were made for Medicare payment for wound treatment (Table 13.1). This suggests that about 60% 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.

A comparison of practice nurse activity from 2005–06 to 2007–08 is provided in the 10 year summary report *General practice activity in Australia 1998–99 to 2007–08: 10 year data tables* available from <www.aihw.gov.au/publications/index.cfm/subject/19> (AIHW catalogue number GEP 23).