

## 2 Primary care practitioners

Primary care practitioners engage in general medical practice or in other fields of the primary care of patients. They include vocationally registered general practitioners (VRGPs), VRGP trainees and other medical practitioners (OMPs) who are not recognised general practitioners but whose Medicare patient billing is mainly for unreferral attendances.

The data in this chapter are presented for various sub-groups of primary care practitioners. The data for VRGPs, VRGP trainees and OMPs are mutually exclusive and sum to the total for primary care practitioners. This is not the case for special interest, locum and deputising service primary care practitioners, who are not mutually exclusive of each other or of the other primary care groups presented.

Monitoring of the primary care workforce is particularly important because:

- growth of the general practice workforce has slowed as a result of a reduction in training numbers;
- each year, the proportion of VRGPs has been increasing, and the proportion of OMPs declining, reflecting government financial incentives for formal qualifications in general practice, continuing education of primary care practitioners, and restrictions since 1996 on doctors becoming OMPs;
- the majority of new entrants to the primary care workforce are women, and continuation of this trend is expected to significantly change the work characteristics of the workforce;
- shortages of general practitioners in many rural and remote areas are considered a serious problem and numerous Commonwealth, State and local government incentive schemes have been introduced to attract and retain more rural doctors;
- locum and deputising service practitioners provide essential support to rural and urban practices, and the numbers of these may be affected by broader workforce change in general practice;
- increasing sub-specialisation is a feature of the total medical workforce and of primary care as a result of advances in research, technology and medical knowledge and trends towards specialising in care of sub-groups of the population.

Features of primary care practitioners in 1996 included the following:

- There were 20,516 primary care practitioners, of whom 17,417 were VRGPs (84.9%), 1,223 were RACGP trainees (6.0%) and 1,876 were OMPs (9.1%).
- 6,651 or 32.4% of primary care practitioners were female, compared with 29.9% in 1993.
- 51.0% of primary care practitioners younger than 35 years were female.
- 58.2% of general practice trainees were female.
- 43.3% of male and 69.6% of female primary care practitioners were younger than 45 years of age.
- 12.2% of male and 51.2% of female primary care practitioners worked fewer than 35 hours per week.
- 4.0% of male and 2.0% of female primary care practitioners worked 80 or more hours per week. These proportions almost doubled in small rural centres, other rural and remote areas (7.3% for males and 3.5% for females).
- 8.6% of primary care practitioners reported practising mainly in a special interest area of care, and the proportion was much higher for OMPs (27.5%).

- Special interest fields of practice were diverse, with the most popular being women's health (7.9% of special interest practitioners), sports medicine (6.6%), counselling and psychotherapy (6.5%) and general surgery (5.8%).
- 1.3% of primary care practitioners practised in an Aboriginal health service.
- 1,442 primary care practitioners reported employment as locums, and 316 employment in a deputising service, representing 8.6% of the primary care workforce.
- 75.3% of male and 81.1% of female primary care practitioners practised in metropolitan centres.
- 74.2% of male and 79.9% of female primary care practitioners gained their initial qualification in Australia.
- 36.1% of those primary care practitioners who had gained their initial qualification in the United Kingdom or Ireland practised in rural and remote areas, as did 23.6% of those who had qualified in Australia, 22.9% of those who had qualified in New Zealand, 8.2% of those who had qualified in Asia and 13.8% of those who had qualified in other countries.
- The number of Medicare primary care providers increased by 2.6% in 1994-95. This growth rate declined to 0.7% in 1995-96 and 0.6% in 1996-97.

The difference between the 20,516 primary care practitioners enumerated in 1996 in the AIHW labour force survey and the 24,526 Medicare providers of general practice services in 1996-97 is explained by about 4,000 salaried hospital non-specialists, medical educators, researchers and others who rendered private practice Medicare services as mainly unreferral attendances in 1996-97. Nearly all of these Medicare providers are classified by the Health Insurance Commission as OMPs and their level of Medicare activity is low.

### **Vocationally registered general practitioners**

The AIHW labour force survey defines VRGPs as primary care practitioners who self-report being either vocationally registered or Fellows of the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP).

Features of VRGPs in 1996 included the following.

- The 17,417 VRGPs in 1996 represented 84.9% of all primary care practitioners.
- 12,148 were male (69.7%) and 5,269 were female (30.3%).
- The average age was 49.1 years for males and 42.4 years for females.
- 51.6% of VRGPs younger than 35 years were female.
- 39.0% of males and 65.5% of females were younger than 45 years of age.
- Male VRGPs worked an average of 51.4 hours per week and female VRGPs worked an average of 34.7 hours per week.
- 11.0% of males and 52.8% of females worked fewer than 35 hours per week.
- Average hours per week worked by males increased relatively uniformly across all geographic regions, ranging from around 51 hours in metropolitan centres to 57.3 hours in remote areas. Female VRGPs worked an average of around 34 hours per week in metropolitan and large and small rural centres, 38.2 hours in other rural areas and 46.9 hours in remote areas.
- 74.7% of males and 81.3% of females had gained their initial qualification in Australia.

- 83.3% of those who were not permanent residents of Australia were practising in metropolitan centres in their main job.
- 77.8% of the primary care practitioners in remote areas were VRGPs, compared with 84.1% in capital cities, 84.8% in metropolitan centres and 86.2%, 91.1% and 87.6% in large rural, small rural and other rural areas respectively.

### **General practitioner (RACGP) trainees**

General practitioner trainees practise under the supervision of an RACGP Fellow. The Commonwealth Government's Medical Training Review Panel (MTRP) collects data from the medical colleges on the numbers of training positions and trainees. The MTRP estimated that there were 1,603 general practice trainees in advanced training positions in 1997 (Department of Health and Family Services 1997).

The AIHW medical labour force survey data are self-reported and identified the following:

- There were 1,223 general practice trainees in 1996, comprising 6.0% of all primary care practitioners.
- 58.2% of RACGP trainees were female.
- 39.3% of female trainees worked fewer than 35 hours per week, compared with 10.5% of males.
- Male trainees worked an average of 45.4 hours per week and female trainees averaged 36.0 hours per week. Average hours worked by males ranged from a high of 48.0 in the Australian Capital Territory to a low of 41.3 in Victoria. Females averaged the longest hours in the Northern Territory (38.6) and the shortest in Western Australia (30.6).
- The average age of RACGP trainees was 32.8 years for males and 31.3 years for females.
- 71.4% of male trainees were located in metropolitan centres, 24.3% in rural areas and 4.3% in remote areas. Females were less likely to work in rural areas – 77.7% were located in metropolitan centres, 19.2% in rural areas and 3.1% in remote areas.
- The main job of 84.2% of RACGP trainees was in private rooms, compared with 90.0% of all primary care practitioners. A further 7.1% had their main job in acute care hospitals and 4.2% worked mainly in non-residential facilities.
- 80.4% of male trainees and 82.6% of female trainees had gained their initial qualification in Australia.

### **Other medical practitioners**

The AIHW labour force survey defines OMPs as primary care practitioners who do not self-report as being either vocationally registered or training to become vocationally registered. There were 1,876 primary care practitioners in this category in the 1996 survey. A further 4,572 medical practitioners were classified as OMPs by the Health Insurance Commission in 1996–97: these practitioners were mainly hospital non-specialists with low levels of Medicare billing activity.

The survey data identified the following:

- The 1,876 OMPs in 1996 comprised 9.1% of all primary care practitioners.
- 1,206 (64.3%) were male and 670 (35.7%) were female. This proportion varied significantly among States and Territories, from a high of 81.1% males in Tasmania to a low of 33.3% males in the Northern Territory.

- The average age was 42.8 years for males and 39.4 years for females. Some 38.4% of males and 39.8% of females were younger than 35 years of age.
- 24.9% of males worked fewer than 35 hours per week, compared with 51.1% of females.
- Males worked an average of 45.5 hours per week and females averaged 34.3 hours.
- 61.8% of males and 64.0% of females practised in metropolitan centres.
- 71.4% of OMPs practised from private rooms in their main job, 10.0% in acute care hospitals and 8.5% in non-residential facilities.
- 66.2% of males and 65.6% of females had gained their initial qualification in Australia. Of the remainder, 8.9% gained their initial qualification in New Zealand, 21.4% in the United Kingdom or Ireland, 30.4% in Asia and 39.3% in other countries.

### **Special interest primary care practitioners**

There were 1,769 primary care practitioners (8.6%) practising mainly in a special interest area of primary care in 1996. This proportion varied across type of primary care practitioner – 6.8% of VRGPs and RACGP trainees and 27.5% of OMPs.

Features of special interest primary care practitioners included the following:

- 7.9% of male and 10.2% of female primary care practitioners were practising mainly in a special interest area. This proportion varied among States and Territories: 2.9% of male and 2.7% of female primary care practitioners in Tasmania, compared with 20.9% and 18.4% respectively in the Northern Territory.
- 48.2% worked in recognised clinical specialties – 54.3% of males and 38.5% of females.
- The largest special interest areas for male special interest primary care practitioners were sports medicine (8.5%) and general surgery (7.5%).
- The largest special interest areas for female special interest primary care practitioners were women's health (18.9%), family planning (6.1%) and counselling and psychotherapy (6.1%).
- 26.7% of all special interest primary care practitioners worked in the four largest special interest areas – women's health (7.9%), sports medicine (6.6%), counselling and psychotherapy (6.5%) and general surgery (5.8%).

### **Primary care locum tenens**

There were 1,442 primary care practitioners who reported current employment as a locum tenens in 1996. Features of these medical practitioners included the following:

- 520 were female (36.1%), of whom 72.3% were younger than 45 years of age (compared with 45.5% of males).
- 29.6% of males and 4.6% of females were aged 65 years or more.
- 67.1% of female locums were VRGPs, 10.8% were RACGP trainees, and 22.2% were OMPs (compared with 64.2%, 5.8% and 30.0% respectively of males).
- 62.0% of female and 30.0% of male locums worked fewer than 35 hours per week.
- Male locums (21.7%) were more likely to work in a rural or remote area in their main job than female locums (15.0%).
- 68.7% of males and 75.0% of females had gained their initial qualification in Australia. Of those who had gained their initial qualification overseas, 40.5% of males had initially

qualified in the United Kingdom or Ireland and 37.7% of females had initially qualified in Asia.

- 83.8% of primary care locums practised in private rooms in their main job and a further 6.8% practised in acute care hospitals.

### **Primary care deputising service practitioners**

There were 316 primary care practitioners who reported current employment as deputising service practitioners in 1996. Features of these medical practitioners included the following:

- 137 were female (43.2%), of whom 88.9% were younger than 45 years of age (compared with 65.3% of males).
- 59.5% of those younger than 35 years were female.
- 32.5% of female deputising service practitioners were VRGPs, 49.7% were RACGP trainees and 17.8% were OMPs (compared with 55.1%, 20.0% and 24.9% respectively of males).
- 34.2% of female and 11.7% of male deputising service practitioners worked less than 35 hours per week.
- 74.2% of males and 76.6% of females had gained their initial qualification in Australia. Of those who had gained their initial qualification overseas, 34.0% of males had initially qualified in the United Kingdom or Ireland and 34.0% in Asia, and 36.4% of females had initially qualified in Asia.
- 75.8% of deputising service practitioners practised in private rooms in their main jobs. A further 8.6% practised in acute care hospitals and 4.7% practised in non-residential facilities.

**Table 9: Primary care practitioners: selected characteristics, States and Territories, 1996**

Characteristic	NSW	Vic	Qld	WA	SA	Tas	ACT	NT	Total	%
<b>Age group</b>										
<b>Males</b>										
<35	476	486	359	161	221	42	18	24	1,787	12.9
35-44	1,369	1,109	715	385	391	125	85	29	4,210	30.4
45-54	1,494	862	614	313	355	104	71	36	3,852	27.8
55-64	832	422	351	215	155	56	26	15	2,081	15.0
65+	761	460	318	183	127	47	30	5	1,934	13.9
<b>Females</b>										
<35	558	499	350	161	165	53	33	40	1,862	28.0
35-44	924	658	500	257	240	75	76	37	2,770	41.6
45-54	499	262	234	141	115	41	40	12	1,349	20.3
55-64	163	108	37	48	24	10	13	6	409	6.2
65+	108	65	42	20	15	3	3	2	261	3.9
<b>Total hours worked per week</b>										
<b>Males</b>										
1-19	220	126	99	56	52	21	7	3	584	4.2
20-34	385	296	160	112	73	35	28	15	1,109	8.0
35-49	1,366	1,071	801	466	385	115	93	35	4,341	31.3
50-64	1,946	1,428	1,058	476	577	164	77	45	5,774	41.6
65-79	713	299	190	115	130	25	19	5	1,498	10.8
80+	302	118	49	32	35	13	5	3	560	4.0
Mean	52.1	49.4	48.9	48.2	50.4	48.5	47.3	46.8	50.3	
Median	52.0	50.0	50.0	49.0	50.0	50.0	47.5	48.0	50.0	
Mode	50.0	50.0	50.0	40.0	50.0	50.0	50.0	60.0	50.0	
<b>Females</b>										
1-19	394	311	246	145	117	27	27	7	1,274	19.2
20-34	694	507	327	223	210	75	56	36	2,132	32.1
35-49	679	524	409	162	147	45	57	27	2,054	30.9
50-64	341	180	144	65	81	25	19	24	883	13.3
65-79	88	38	23	14	6	1	1	2	174	2.6
80+	57	33	12	17	5	2	4	2	134	2.0
Mean	36.1	33.9	33.5	33.0	32.9	33.7	34.2	38.8	34.6	
Median	35.0	34.0	35.0	31.0	31.0	32.0	34.0	40.0	34.0	
Mode	40.0	40.0	40.0	40.0	30.0	50.0	40.0	50.0	40.0	
<b>Region of main job</b>										
<b>Males</b>										
Capital city	3,353	2,461	1,144	943	965	193	225	56	9,347	67.4
Other metro. centre	570	122	403	0	0	0	0	0	1,095	7.9
Large rural centre	214	148	349	0	16	76	1	0	804	5.8
Small rural centre	311	205	135	96	55	33	0	2	840	6.1
Other rural area	457	393	242	105	200	74	0	3	1,479	10.7
Remote	28	8	85	111	13	1	0	54	300	2.2
<b>Females</b>										
Capital city	1,669	1,276	686	533	477	112	165	45	4,965	74.6
Other metro. centre	243	54	132	0	0	0	0	0	429	6.5
Large rural centre	104	69	163	0	2	25	0	0	368	5.5
Small rural centre	109	67	61	23	16	15	0	0	293	4.4
Other rural area	123	126	92	36	70	27	0	4	476	7.2
Remote	5	1	28	34	4	0	0	46	119	1.8
<b>Work setting of main job</b>										
Private rooms	6,316	4,561	3,246	1,676	1,695	520	325	122	18,467	90.0
Non-residential facility	168	131	88	56	35	13	15	15	524	2.6
Aboriginal health service	23	11	17	31	4	3	1	51	141	0.7
Acute care hospital	517	75	85	26	22	12	3	3	743	3.6
Other residential facility	9	5	5	10	1	1	0	2	34	0.2
Educational institution	38	78	26	23	22	4	17	5	215	1.0
Defence forces	43	16	22	6	5	0	17	1	115	0.6
Other	72	54	31	57	27	10	15	11	278	1.4
<b>Males</b>	<b>4,932</b>	<b>3,338</b>	<b>2,358</b>	<b>1,255</b>	<b>1,255</b>	<b>377</b>	<b>230</b>	<b>115</b>	<b>13,865</b>	<b>67.6</b>
<b>Females</b>	<b>2,252</b>	<b>1,593</b>	<b>1,163</b>	<b>625</b>	<b>569</b>	<b>185</b>	<b>165</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>6,651</b>	<b>32.4</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>7,185</b>	<b>4,931</b>	<b>3,521</b>	<b>1,880</b>	<b>1,824</b>	<b>562</b>	<b>395</b>	<b>210</b>	<b>20,516</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Table 10: Primary care practitioners: selected characteristics, region of main job, Australia, 1996**

Characteristic	Region of main job						Total	%
	Capital city	Other metro. centre	Large rural centre	Small rural centre	Other rural area	Remote area		
Average age								
Males	48.6	49.0	47.4	47.1	46.9	44.0	48.3	..
Females	41.4	40.3	40.6	41.8	40.8	38.0	41.2	..
Total hours worked								
Males								
1-19	427	35	27	27	62	8	585	4.2
20-34	804	93	52	62	73	18	1,102	7.9
35-49	3,062	363	234	224	343	64	4,290	30.9
50-64	3,777	446	393	377	645	140	5,778	41.7
65-79	946	117	77	106	233	49	1,528	11.0
80+	331	41	20	45	123	22	582	4.2
Mean	49.4	50.2	50.6	52.3	54.5	55.9	50.3	..
Females								
1-19	932	83	80	55	103	10	1,263	19.0
20-34	1,624	142	118	94	105	24	2,108	31.7
35-49	1,600	127	99	85	126	34	2,072	31.2
50-64	609	57	52	48	96	31	892	13.4
65-79	108	12	12	7	28	13	180	2.7
80+	91	7	5	5	19	7	135	2.0
Mean	34.0	34.1	33.6	34.5	38.3	45.3	34.6	..
Work setting of main job								
Private rooms	12,845	1,355	1,061	1,057	1,852	293	18,462	90.0
Non-residential facility	388	40	27	15	33	17	521	2.5
Aboriginal health service	52	5	9	5	5	57	134	0.7
Acute care hospital	532	77	58	42	53	23	784	3.8
Other residential facility	24	4	0	0	0	2	29	0.1
Educational institution	179	17	6	4	0	2	208	1.0
Defence forces	87	13	6	1	5	2	115	0.6
Other	205	14	4	8	7	25	263	1.3
Country of initial qualification								
Males								
Australia	6,874	781	623	621	1,171	218	10,289	74.2
New Zealand	140	20	11	13	16	7	205	1.5
United Kingdom/Ireland	688	115	125	130	179	55	1,290	9.3
Asia	1,021	124	20	43	58	2	1,267	9.1
Other countries	625	55	26	33	55	19	814	5.9
Females								
Australia	3,904	365	309	236	403	94	5,312	79.9
New Zealand	67	0	3	4	7	6	87	1.3
United Kingdom/Ireland	313	22	45	39	51	19	489	7.4
Asia	391	29	5	5	7	0	436	6.6
Other countries	289	13	7	9	8	0	326	4.9
Australian residency status								
Males								
Australian citizen	8,660	1,009	746	767	1,357	261	12,800	92.3
Permanent resident	632	75	55	66	109	26	962	6.9
Not permanent resident	56	11	3	7	13	13	103	0.7
Females								
Australian citizen	4,552	397	331	259	441	108	6,088	91.5
Permanent resident	375	20	34	32	29	11	501	7.5
Not permanent resident	37	12	3	3	7	0	62	0.9
Males	9,347	1,095	804	840	1,479	300	13,865	67.6
Females	4,965	429	368	293	476	119	6,651	32.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>14,312</b>	<b>1,524</b>	<b>1,172</b>	<b>1,133</b>	<b>1,956</b>	<b>419</b>	<b>20,516</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Table 11: Primary care practitioners: sex, qualification and main field of practice, States and Territories, 1996**

<b>Qualification/ main field of practice</b>	<b>NSW</b>	<b>Vic</b>	<b>Qld</b>	<b>WA</b>	<b>SA</b>	<b>Tas</b>	<b>ACT</b>	<b>NT</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Males</b>									
VRGP									
General practice	3,942	2,879	1,974	939	1,049	345	186	76	11,390
Special interest area	354	94	74	153	46	8	13	15	758
Total	4,297	2,973	2,048	1,092	1,095	354	199	91	12,148
RACGP trainee									
General practice	157	91	114	36	67	6	7	12	488
Special interest area	8	0	2	8	0	0	0	4	23
Total	165	91	115	44	67	6	7	16	511
OMP									
General practice	324	209	169	101	60	16	13	3	894
Special interest area	147	66	26	22	33	2	11	4	312
Total	471	274	195	123	93	18	24	7	1,206
Total									
General practice	4,423	3,178	2,256	1,076	1,176	367	206	91	12,773
Special interest area	510	160	102	184	79	11	24	24	1,092
Total	4,932	3,338	2,358	1,259	1,255	377	230	115	13,865
<b>Females</b>									
VRGP									
General practice	1,558	1,192	870	424	451	159	129	51	4,834
Special interest area	178	65	54	81	34	5	7	11	434
Total	1,736	1,257	924	505	485	164	136	61	5,269
RACGP trainee									
General practice	230	171	137	42	42	17	19	16	675
Special interest area	12	11	8	0	0	0	0	6	37
Total	242	182	146	42	42	17	19	22	712
OMP									
General practice	190	109	68	47	31	4	4	12	465
Special interest area	84	45	25	31	12	0	5	2	205
Total	274	155	93	78	43	4	9	14	670
Total									
General practice	1,978	1,472	1,076	513	524	180	152	79	5,975
Special interest area	274	121	87	112	46	5	12	18	676
Total	2,252	1,593	1,163	626	569	185	165	98	6,651
<b>Persons</b>									
VRGP									
General practice	5,501	4,071	2,844	1,363	1,500	504	315	126	16,224
Special interest area	532	159	128	234	80	13	20	26	1,192
Total	6,033	4,230	2,972	1,597	1,580	517	335	152	17,417
RACGP trainee									
General practice	387	262	251	78	108	23	26	28	1,163
Special interest area	20	11	10	8	0	0	0	10	60
Total	407	272	261	86	108	23	26	39	1,223
OMP									
General practice	513	318	237	148	91	20	17	15	1,360
Special interest area	231	111	50	54	45	2	16	6	516
Total	745	429	287	202	136	22	34	22	1,876
Total									
General practice	6,401	4,650	3,332	1,589	1,700	547	358	170	18,747
Special interest area	784	281	189	296	124	16	37	43	1,769
Total	<b>7,185</b>	<b>4,931</b>	<b>3,521</b>	<b>1,885</b>	<b>1,824</b>	<b>563</b>	<b>395</b>	<b>212</b>	<b>20,516</b>

Note: A further dissection of VRGPs, RACGP trainees and OMPs is available in Tables 45–51 on the Internet at <http://www.aihw.gov.au>.