

6 Rural and remote medical workforce

In 1997, there were 144.0 practising medical practitioners per 100,000 population employed in their main job in rural and remote areas compared with 142.8 in 1996. This compares with 306.2 per 100,000 population in metropolitan areas in 1997 and 308.2 per 100,000 population in 1996. Remedying this much lower level of medical workforce provision in rural and remote areas has been a planning priority for Commonwealth, State and local governments and medical professional bodies for many years and there are numerous incentive schemes to attract and retain doctors in rural areas.

In this chapter, characteristics of the medical workforce are analysed geographically using the 1994 rural, remote and metropolitan areas classification of the Department of Primary Industries and Energy and the Department of Health and Family Services.

In 1997, there were 7,717 medical practitioners who worked in a rural or remote area in their main job – 16.0% of all medical practitioners. This contrasts with the overall population distribution of 28.8% living in rural and remote areas in 1997. Features of these medical practitioners included the following.

Geographic distribution

- 2,984 (38.7%) worked in their main job in a large rural centre; 1,900 (24.6%) worked in a small rural centre; 2,200 (28.5%) worked in other rural areas; and the remaining 633 (8.2%) worked in remote areas.
- The 144.0 practising medical practitioners per 100,000 population in rural and remote areas varied across geographic region – 268.8 per 100,000 population in large rural centres; 156.9 in small rural centres; 89.0 in other rural areas; and 112.5 in remote areas. It also varied across States and Territories, from a high of 190.0 in the Northern Territory to a low of 99.3 in South Australia.
- In 1997, there were 108.5 primary care practitioners per 100,000 population in large rural centres (one practitioner per 1,151 population), 95.0 per 100,000 in small rural centres (one practitioner per 1,053 population), 76.8 per 100,000 in other rural areas (one per 1,303 population) and 71.7 per 100,000 population in remote areas (one per 1,395 population). In comparison, there were 121.4 primary care practitioners per 100,000 population in capital cities (one per 824 population) and 107.4 per 100,000 in other metropolitan areas (one per 931 population).
- In remote areas the lower provision of primary care practitioners is partially offset by a higher provision of non-specialist hospital doctors with 16.9 practitioners per 100,000 population (one practitioner per 5,917 population) in remote areas compared with 7.7 per 100,000 (one practitioner per 12,987 population) in small rural centres and 2.5 per 100,000 (one practitioner per 40,000 population) in other rural areas.

Sex

- 1,899 (24.6%) medical practitioners in the rural medical workforce were female. This proportion ranged from 21.9% in small rural areas to 30.4% in remote areas.

Occupation

- 60.4% of practitioners working mainly in rural and remote areas were employed in primary care; 25.9% were specialists; 7.7% were hospital non-specialists; 2.8% were specialists-in-training; and the remaining 3.3% were non-clinicians. In comparison, in metropolitan areas 39.2% of all medical practitioners were working in primary care; 34.4% were specialists; 9.6% were hospital non-specialists; 10.8% were specialists-in-training; and 6.0% were non-clinicians.
- The distribution of rural practitioners across occupation differed by gender. For males, 57.5% were employed in primary care and 30.8% were specialists; while 69.3% of females were employed in primary care and 11.1% were specialists.

Work setting in main job

- 73.8% of medical practitioners employed in rural and remote areas worked in their main job in private rooms; 19.9% worked in acute care hospitals; and the remaining 6.3% were employed in other work settings.
- The work setting differed across geographic region and reflected the occupation of the practitioners providing medical services in the regions. The proportion of practitioners working in private rooms increased from 56.6% in capital cities to 89.0% in other rural areas, and that in acute care hospitals declined from 32.8% to 7.7%. Remote areas had the lowest proportion working from private rooms (51.5%), with 25.0% working in acute care hospitals and 12.1% working in an Aboriginal health service.

Hours worked

- Medical practitioners employed in rural and remote areas worked an average of 49.6 hours per week compared with 47.2 hours per week in metropolitan areas. This average was higher in remote areas (50.4 hours) as 87.5% of doctors in remote areas were working full-time (35 hours or more per week).

Overseas graduates

- 23.5% of rural and remote medical practitioners in 1997 had gained their initial qualification overseas – the proportion ranged from 20.7% in other rural areas to 30.6% in remote areas.
- Of rural and remote medical practitioners who gained their initial qualification overseas, 58.3% qualified in the United Kingdom or Ireland, 16.0% in Asia, 9.3% in New Zealand, and the remaining 16.5% in other countries.

Table 26: Medical practitioners: selected characteristics and region of main job, Australia, 1997

Selected characteristics	Geographic location of main job						Total	Metro areas	Rural & remote areas
	Capital city	Other metro area	Large rural centre	Small rural centre	Other rural area	Remote area			
Sex									
Male	26,269	2,684	2,230	1,483	1,664	441	34,772	28,954	5,818
Female	10,833	817	754	417	536	192	13,549	11,650	1,899
% female	29.2	23.3	25.3	21.9	24.4	30.4	28.0	28.7	24.6
Occupation of main job									
Primary care practitioner	14,387	1,511	1,206	1,152	1,898	404	20,557	15,898	4,659
Hospital non-specialist	3,480	404	341	93	61	95	4,475	3,884	591
Specialist	12,843	1,149	1,173	558	193	76	15,992	13,992	2,000
Specialist-in-training	4,095	307	144	33	15	23	4,617	4,402	215
Non-clinician	2,297	131	120	64	32	35	2,680	2,428	252
Age (years)									
Less than 35	9,566	800	580	255	344	196	11,742	10,367	1,375
35–44	10,563	1,047	1,018	665	799	235	14,328	11,610	2,718
45–54	8,841	877	757	540	546	107	11,667	9,718	1,950
55–64	4,815	466	396	262	293	60	6,291	5,281	1,010
65 and over	3,317	311	234	178	218	34	4,292	3,628	664
% aged 65 and over	8.9	8.9	7.8	9.4	9.9	5.4	8.9	8.9	8.6
Average age	45.4	45.4	45.1	47.0	46.7	42.1	45.3	45.4	45.8
Hours worked per week									
Less than 20	2,717	201	194	113	168	36	3,429	2,919	511
20–34	4,630	397	280	198	259	43	5,807	5,027	780
35–49	11,454	1,043	808	526	523	188	14,541	12,496	2,045
50–64	13,481	1,358	1,265	731	821	249	17,906	14,839	3,067
65–79	3,442	350	333	224	303	78	4,730	3,792	937
80 and over	1,379	152	104	109	126	39	1,908	1,531	378
% employed full-time	80.2	82.9	84.1	83.6	80.6	87.5	80.9	80.4	83.3
Average hours worked	47.0	48.4	48.9	50.1	49.7	50.4	47.5	47.2	49.6
Work setting of main job									
Private rooms	20,990	2,087	1,931	1,481	1,958	326	28,773	23,077	5,696
Acute care hospital	12,170	1,107	887	319	170	158	14,811	13,277	1,534
Residential	113	22	4	3	1	2	145	135	10
Aboriginal health service	132	8	16	11	5	77	248	140	108
Non-residential facility	938	104	69	38	47	27	1,222	1,042	180
Educational institution	1,090	82	14	6	0	5	1,196	1,172	24
Defence forces	175	23	12	4	8	2	224	198	26
Other government	807	20	22	19	4	14	886	827	59
Other	687	49	30	20	7	23	817	737	81
Country of initial qualification									
Australia	29,647	2,725	2,306	1,412	1,744	439	38,273	32,372	5,901
New Zealand	844	121	76	43	24	26	1,134	965	169
UK/Ireland	2,539	293	398	278	273	109	3,891	2,832	1,059
Asia	2,388	236	93	83	84	30	2,914	2,624	290
Other countries	1,683	127	111	85	74	29	2,110	1,811	299
Residency status									
Australian citizen	34,237	3,178	2,671	1,696	2,040	521	44,342	37,414	6,928
Not an Australian citizen									
Permanent resident	2,571	269	236	175	151	62	3,463	2,840	623
Not a permanent resident	295	55	78	29	10	50	516	350	166
Medical practitioners per 100,000 population									
	313.0	248.8	268.3	156.7	89.0	112.4	259.5	306.2	144.0
Total	37,102	3,502	2,984	1,900	2,200	633	48,321	40,604	7,717

Table 27: Per cent of clinician practitioners who were female: occupation, region of main job and age, Australia, 1997

Occupation/ region of main job	Age (years)					Total
	<35	35–44	45–54	55–64	65+	
Primary care practitioner						
Capital city	54.3	44.4	29.3	17.6	12.8	35.2
Other metropolitan centre	49.0	36.7	21.6	11.9	6.3	26.6
Large rural centre	52.0	38.1	27.1	17.2	8.1	32.6
Small rural centre	41.2	30.7	22.8	14.7	7.7	26.3
Other rural area	52.3	27.5	16.4	14.7	13.2	25.7
Remote areas	57.7	30.2	10.6	18.6	20.5	32.6
<i>Total</i>	<i>53.2</i>	<i>40.4</i>	<i>26.9</i>	<i>16.7</i>	<i>11.8</i>	<i>33.0</i>
Hospital non-specialist						
Capital city	41.3	45.3	47.8	43.9	55.7	42.2
Other metropolitan centre	46.2	33.3	33.4	60.2	0.0	43.5
Large rural centre	52.9	40.8	43.4	33.2	57.9	49.5
Small rural centre	52.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	26.8
Other rural area	13.4	23.7	46.7	0.0	0.0	18.0
Remote areas	37.7	28.9	14.2	29.4	0.0	33.0
<i>Total</i>	<i>42.3</i>	<i>40.7</i>	<i>41.9</i>	<i>40.1</i>	<i>43.7</i>	<i>42.0</i>
Specialist						
Capital city	37.7	23.9	14.4	10.0	6.3	16.9
Other metropolitan centre	24.1	13.9	6.6	5.3	10.3	9.8
Large rural centre	26.0	13.4	8.8	7.7	1.8	10.1
Small rural centre	30.2	17.8	6.7	3.6	6.7	9.9
Other rural area	61.1	27.9	9.2	4.1	0.0	11.3
Remote areas	79.8	15.0	10.6	5.1	38.6	20.2
<i>Total</i>	<i>36.8</i>	<i>22.1</i>	<i>13.0</i>	<i>9.1</i>	<i>6.5</i>	<i>15.6</i>
Specialist-in-training						
Capital city	34.5	30.1	48.6	0.0	0.0	34.1
Other metropolitan centre	35.8	17.8	20.3	0.0	0.0	31.6
Large rural centre	27.5	25.3	100.0	0.0	0.0	27.7
Small rural centre	38.5	50.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	50.3
Other rural area	69.4	50.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	47.4
Remote areas	45.5	40.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	5.6
<i>Total</i>	<i>34.5</i>	<i>28.6</i>	<i>45.6</i>	<i>0.0</i>	<i>0.0</i>	<i>33.8</i>
Total						
Capital city	42.1	34.8	22.5	13.6	9.9	29.0
Other metropolitan centre	42.8	26.1	14.5	9.5	7.6	23.3
Large rural centre	46.0	28.1	17.3	11.6	7.1	25.1
Small rural centre	43.6	26.5	16.2	9.1	7.3	21.8
Other rural area	48.7	27.3	15.8	12.3	11.8	24.4
Remote areas	49.8	26.9	10.7	13.9	27.0	30.1
Total	42.7	32.7	20.8	12.9	9.7	27.8