

7 Aboriginal health service employment

Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples experience much poorer health than the general population, and have a life expectancy at birth more than 15 years less than for other Australians (AIHW 1998, pp. 28–34).

In 1997, AIHW and the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health conducted the first comprehensive analysis of expenditure on health services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This found that Indigenous peoples receive health services through Medicare and the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme at only one-quarter of the rate per person for other Australians. Offsetting this to some extent are services from Indigenous health organisations.

In the work setting question in the AIHW annual national medical labour force survey, doctors are asked to identify whether they are employed in an Aboriginal health service in their main or a second or third job. This chapter presents data on the characteristics of doctors who identified that they were employed in an Aboriginal health service. The AIHW survey did not collect data on the Aboriginality of these doctors because the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander medical practitioners was too small to protect practitioner confidentiality in tabulations. At the 1996 population census, there were 29 general medical practitioners, 12 medical practitioners in training, 20 specialists and also 21 medical administrators who identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. The specialists included five pathologists and four surgeons.

There were 522 medical practitioners in 1997 who indicated that the employment setting of their main, second or third job was an Aboriginal health service. Features of these medical practitioners are shown below.

Geographic distribution

- The way in which health services are provided to Indigenous people, including the extent to which Aboriginal health service organisations are used, varies among the States and Territories. Hence, the distribution of Aboriginal health service clinicians in some States and Territories differed significantly from the distribution of the Indigenous population: 12.3% of these clinicians were in Queensland with 27.3% of the Indigenous population; 15.9% were in Victoria with 5.8% of the population. The other States and Territories had approximately the same proportion of Aboriginal health service clinicians as of Indigenous population.
- 63.0% of Aboriginal health service medical practitioners were located in metropolitan areas where 36.2% of the Indigenous population was located.

Sex

- 174 (33.3%) of the 522 medical practitioners employed in an Aboriginal health service were female. The female proportion was between 28% and 34% across all States and Territories except the Northern Territory (42.7%) and Western Australia (38.9%).

Occupation

- 51.3% of Aboriginal health service medical practitioners were primary care practitioners; 36.4% were specialists; 4.3% were specialists-in-training; 2.8% were hospital non-specialists; and the remaining 5.1% worked in a non-clinical field including administration and education.

Age

- The average age of these medical practitioners was 42.5 years. This average varied across States and Territories, from a high of 51.1 years in Tasmania to a low of 40.0 years in New South Wales.

Hours worked

- Medical practitioners in an Aboriginal health service worked an average of 22.0 hours per week mainly because only 41.8% of these doctors were working in such a service as their main job. Average hours worked varied among States and Territories, from a low of 11.9 hours per week in Tasmania to a high of 28.3 hours per week in the Northern Territory. Most practitioners (68.0%) worked fewer than 35 hours a week in the Aboriginal health service.

Overseas graduates

- 83.9% of Aboriginal health service medical practitioners had gained their initial qualification in Australia. Of those who had gained an initial qualification overseas, 52.7% qualified in the United Kingdom or Ireland.

Aboriginal health service as a main job

- There were 218 medical practitioners who worked in an Aboriginal health service in their main job in 1997. Of these:
 - 41.9% were female.
 - 65.3% were primary care practitioners; 18.3% were specialists; 2.8% were hospital non-specialists; 6.3% were specialists-in-training; and the remaining 7.3% worked in a non-clinical field including administration and education.
 - The average age of these medical practitioners was 39.6 years.
 - 58.5% were employed in their main job as an Aboriginal health service medical practitioner in a metropolitan area.
 - Most medical practitioners whose main job was in an Aboriginal health service (63.3%) worked 35 or more hours per week. The average was 37.0 hours per week in 1996.
 - 80.8% of medical practitioners working in an Aboriginal health service in their main job had gained their initial qualification in Australia. Of those who initially qualified overseas, 52.4% had qualified in the United Kingdom or Ireland.

Table 28: Medical practitioners employed in an Aboriginal health service^(a): selected characteristics, States and Territories, 1997

Selected characteristics	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	NT	ACT	Total	%
Occupation										
<i>Clinician</i>	139	81	64	43	74	14	68	12	496	94.9
Primary care practitioner	62	33	37	23	43	9	54	6	268	51.3
Hospital non-specialist	7	0	3	0	2	0	3	0	15	2.8
Specialist	59	44	20	19	27	5	11	6	190	36.4
Specialist-in-training	11	4	4	1	2	0	0	0	22	4.3
Non-clinician	9	2	0	2	8	0	5	0	27	5.1
Geographic location										
Metropolitan	121	59	41	28	41	7	20	12	329	63.0
Non-metropolitan	27	24	24	17	41	7	54	0	193	37.0
% metropolitan	82.0	71.4	62.9	63.0	50.1	48.3	26.6	100.0	63.0	..
Sex										
Males	107	56	43	32	50	11	42	8	348	66.7
Females	41	27	22	13	32	3	32	4	174	33.3
% female	28.0	32.7	33.6	28.6	38.9	22.4	42.7	37.0	33.3	..
Age (years)										
Average age	40.0	45.3	43.7	47.9	40.7	51.1	40.7	44.1	42.5	..
Less than 35	21	13	11	4	12	0	26	3	92	17.5
35–44	60	36	23	18	37	6	32	2	214	41.1
45–54	45	21	17	12	18	3	8	6	129	24.7
55 and over	21	14	12	11	15	5	8	1	87	16.7
Hours worked per week										
Average hours worked	23.1	14.9	17.1	19.3	29.1	11.9	28.3	16.6	22.0	..
Less than 20	73	46	37	22	27	11	26	8	249	47.8
20–34	22	26	8	11	18	2	15	3	105	20.2
35–49	24	9	14	6	18	2	20	0	94	18.0
50–64	21	0	5	3	14	0	13	2	58	11.1
65–79	6	2	0	2	4	0	0	0	14	2.7
80 and over	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0.3
% employed full-time	35.5	13.8	30.0	25.0	44.9	11.2	44.7	12.6	32.1	..
Country of initial qualification										
Australia	127	75	53	42	64	11	59	8	438	83.9
New Zealand	8	0	0	0	0	0	2	2	11	2.2
UK/Ireland	4	6	4	0	14	2	12	3	44	8.5
Asia	4	0	0	3	2	0	2	0	10	2.0
Other countries	5	2	7	0	2	2	0	0	18	3.5
Residency status										
Australian citizen	136	81	51	45	68	12	64	11	468	89.6
Not Australian citizen										
Permanent resident	11	2	8	0	6	2	6	2	37	7.0
Not permanent resident	1	0	5	0	8	0	3	0	18	3.4
Total	148	83	64	45	82	14	74	12	522	100.0
Practitioners per 100,000 Indigenous pop. ^(b)										
	131.9	362.1	59.8	199.1	143.1	89.5	139.9	382.6	132.5	..

(a) All medical practitioners who reported working in an Aboriginal health service in a main, second or third job.

(b) These figures should be used with caution, as they have not been converted to full-time equivalents.