

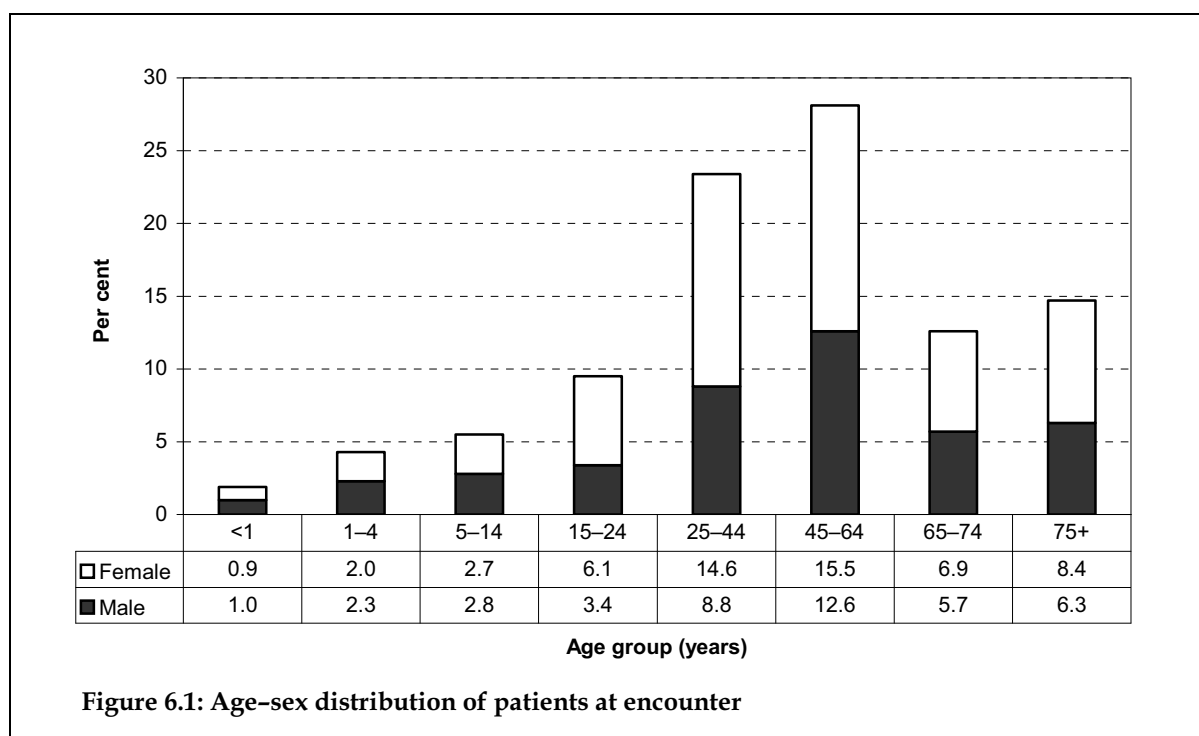
## 6 The patients

This chapter reports data collected between April 2007 and March 2008 about the characteristics of patients and their reasons for encounter from the 10th year of the BEACH program. Data on patient characteristics and reasons for encounter are reported for each year from 1998–99 to 2007–08 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](http://www.aihw.gov.au/publications/index.cfm/subject/19)> (AIHW catalogue number GEP 23).

### 6.1 Age–sex distribution of patients at encounter

The age–sex distribution of patients at the 95,898 encounters is shown in Figure 6.1. Females accounted for the greater proportion of encounters (57.1%). This was reflected across all age groups except for children aged less than 15 years (Figure 6.1; Table 6.1).

Patients aged less than 25 years accounted for 21.2% of encounters; those aged 25–44 years accounted for 23.4% of encounters, patients aged 45–64 years accounted for 28.1% and those aged 65 years and over accounted for 27.3% of encounters (Table 6.1).



Note: Missing data removed. The distributions will not agree perfectly with those in Table 6.1 because of missing data in either age or sex fields.

### 6.2 Other patient characteristics

Table 6.1 provides a view of other characteristics of the patients. In summary:

- the patient was new to the practice at 8.6% of encounters.
- almost 42% of encounters were with patients who held a Commonwealth concession card and 2.8% were with persons who held a Repatriation health card.

- at 9.9% of encounters the patient was from a non-English-speaking background.
- at 0.9% of encounters the patient identified themselves as an Aboriginal person or Torres Strait Islander.

**Table 6.1: Characteristics of the patients at encounters**

Patient characteristics	Number	Per cent of encounters (n = 95,898)	95% LCL	95% UCL
Sex (missing) <sup>(a)</sup>	876			
Males	40,761	42.9	42.1	43.7
Females	54,261	57.1	56.3	57.9
Age group (missing) <sup>(a)</sup>	784			
< 1 year	1,864	2	1.8	2.1
1–4 years	4,114	4.3	4.1	4.6
5–14 years	5,214	5.5	5.2	5.8
15–24 years	9,004	9.5	9.0	9.9
25–44 years	22,289	23.4	22.7	24.1
45–64 years	26,695	28.1	27.5	28.6
65–74 years	11,961	12.6	12.1	13.1
75+ years	13,972	14.7	13.9	15.5
Other characteristics <sup>(b)</sup>				
New patient to practice	8,136	8.6	7.8	9.4
Commonwealth concession card	40,065	41.8	40.3	43.3
Repatriation health card	2,658	2.8	2.5	3.0
Non-English-speaking background	9,457	9.9	8.2	11.5
Aboriginal person	751	0.8	0.6	1.0
Torres Strait Islander	99	0.1	0.0	0.2
Aboriginal person and Torres Strait Islander	26	0.0	0.0	0.0

(a) Missing data removed.

(b) Missing data for each of the listed 'other' patient characteristics were counted as a no response.

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

## 6.3 Patient reasons for encounter

International interest in reasons for encounter (RFEs) has been developing over the past three decades. RFEs reflect the patient's demand for care and can provide an indication of service use patterns, which may benefit from intervention on a population level.<sup>57</sup>

RFEs are those concerns and expectations that patients bring to the GP. Participating GPs were asked to record at least one and up to three patient RFEs in words as close as possible to those used by the patient, before the diagnostic or management process had begun. These reflect the patient's view of their reasons for consulting the GP. RFEs can be expressed in terms of one or more symptoms (for example, 'itchy eyes', 'chest pain'), in diagnostic terms (for example, 'about my diabetes', 'for my hypertension'), a request for a service ('I need more scripts', 'I want a referral'), an expressed fear of disease or a need for a check-up.

Patient RFEs can have a one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-one and many-to-many relationship to problems managed. That is, the patient may describe a single RFE that relates to a single problem managed at the encounter, one RFE that relates to multiple problems, multiple symptoms that relate to a single problem managed at the encounter, or multiple RFEs that relate to multiple problems managed at the encounter.

### Number of reasons for encounter

There were 146,696 RFEs recorded. At 58.9% of encounters only one RFE was recorded and at 29.1% two RFEs were recorded (Table 6.2). Patients presented on average with 153.0 RFEs per 100 encounters, or 1.5 RFEs per encounter (Table 6.3).

**Table 6.2: Number of patient reasons for encounter**

Number of RFEs at encounter	Number of encounters (n = 95,898)	Per cent of encounters	95% LCL	95% UCL
One RFE	56,525	58.9	57.7	60.2
Two RFEs	27,949	29.1	28.5	29.8
Three RFEs	11,425	11.9	11.2	12.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>95,898</b>	<b>100.0</b>	—	—

*Note:* RFEs—reasons for encounter; LCL—lower confidence limit; UCL—upper confidence limit.

### Reasons for encounter by ICPC-2 chapter

The distribution of patient RFEs by ICPC-2 chapter and the most common RFEs within each chapter are presented in Table 6.3. Each chapter and individual RFE is expressed as a percentage of all RFEs and as a rate per 100 encounters with 95% confidence limits.

RFEs of a general and unspecified nature were presented at a rate of 40.1 per 100 encounters, with requests for prescriptions and test results most frequently recorded. RFEs related to the respiratory system arose at a rate of 20.6 per 100 encounters, while those related to the musculoskeletal system and the skin were each recorded at a rate of 15.4 per 100 encounters (Table 6.3).

**Table 6.3: Distribution of patient reasons for encounter, by ICP-2 chapter and most frequent individual reasons for encounter within chapter**

Reasons for encounter	Number	Per cent of total RFEs <sup>(a)</sup> (n = 146,696)	Rate per 100 encounters <sup>(b)</sup> (n = 95,898)	95% LCL	95% UCL
<b>General &amp; unspecified</b>	<b>38,441</b>	<b>26.2</b>	<b>40.1</b>	<b>39.0</b>	<b>41.2</b>
Prescription NOS	8,191	5.6	8.5	8.0	9.1
Results tests/procedures NOS	6,147	4.2	6.4	6.0	6.8
Check-up—general*	3,803	2.6	4.0	3.7	4.2
Immunisation/vaccination—general	2,919	2.0	3.0	2.8	3.2
Fever	2,057	1.4	2.1	1.8	2.5
Administrative procedure NOS	1,885	1.3	2.0	1.8	2.1
Weakness/tiredness	1,302	0.9	1.4	1.2	1.5
Blood test NOS	1,132	0.8	1.2	1.0	1.3
Chest pain NOS	1,015	0.7	1.1	1.0	1.1
Observation/health education/advice/diet NOS	952	0.6	1.0	0.9	1.1
Other referrals NEC	876	0.6	0.9	0.8	1.0
Trauma/injury NOS	783	0.5	0.8	0.7	0.9
Other reason for encounter NEC	730	0.5	0.8	0.6	0.9
Clarify/discuss patient RFE/demand NOS	670	0.5	0.7	0.6	0.8
<b>Respiratory</b>	<b>19,764</b>	<b>13.5</b>	<b>20.6</b>	<b>19.7</b>	<b>21.5</b>
Cough	5,992	4.1	6.2	5.8	6.7
Throat complaint	3,143	2.1	3.3	3.0	3.6
Upper respiratory tract infection	2,154	1.5	2.2	2.0	2.5
Immunisation/vaccination—respiratory	1,436	1.0	1.5	1.2	1.8
Nasal congestion/sneezing	1,337	0.9	1.4	1.2	1.6
Asthma	723	0.5	0.8	0.7	0.8
Shortness of breath, dyspnoea	703	0.5	0.7	0.7	0.8
<b>Musculoskeletal</b>	<b>14,793</b>	<b>10.1</b>	<b>15.4</b>	<b>14.9</b>	<b>15.9</b>
Back complaint*	3,041	2.1	3.2	3.0	3.4
Knee complaint	1,271	0.9	1.3	1.2	1.4
Foot/toe complaint	1,045	0.7	1.1	1.0	1.2
Shoulder complaint	971	0.7	1.0	0.9	1.1
Neck complaint	885	0.6	0.9	0.8	1.0
Leg/thigh complaint	877	0.6	0.9	0.8	1.0
Injury musculoskeletal NOS	709	0.5	0.7	0.6	0.8
<b>Skin</b>	<b>14,787</b>	<b>10.1</b>	<b>15.4</b>	<b>14.8</b>	<b>16.1</b>
Rash*	2,383	1.6	2.5	2.3	2.6
Skin complaint	1,367	0.9	1.4	1.3	1.5
Check-up—skin*	1,339	0.9	1.4	1.1	1.7
Swelling*	1,019	0.7	1.1	1.0	1.2

(continued)

**Table 6.3 (continued): Distribution of patient reasons for encounter, by ICPC-2 chapter and most frequent individual reasons for encounter within chapter**

Reasons for encounter	Number	Per cent of total RFEs <sup>(a)</sup> (n = 146,696)	Rate per 100 encounters <sup>(b)</sup> (n = 95,898)	95% LCL	95% UCL
<b>Cardiovascular</b>	<b>10,756</b>	<b>7.3</b>	<b>11.2</b>	<b>10.6</b>	<b>11.8</b>
Check-up—cardiovascular*	5,133	3.5	5.4	5.0	5.7
Hypertension/high blood pressure*	1,971	1.3	2.1	1.8	2.3
Prescription—cardiovascular	916	0.6	1.0	0.8	1.2
<b>Digestive</b>	<b>9,922</b>	<b>6.8</b>	<b>10.3</b>	<b>10.0</b>	<b>10.7</b>
Abdominal pain*	1,682	1.1	1.8	1.6	1.9
Diarrhoea	1,388	0.9	1.4	1.3	1.6
Vomiting	1,027	0.7	1.1	1.0	1.2
<b>Psychological</b>	<b>7,526</b>	<b>5.1</b>	<b>7.8</b>	<b>7.5</b>	<b>8.2</b>
Depression*	1,954	1.3	2.0	1.9	2.2
Anxiety*	1,044	0.7	1.1	1.0	1.2
Sleep disturbance	951	0.6	1.0	0.9	1.1
<b>Endocrine &amp; metabolic</b>	<b>6,223</b>	<b>4.2</b>	<b>6.5</b>	<b>6.1</b>	<b>6.8</b>
Diabetes (non-gestational)*	1,204	0.8	1.3	1.1	1.4
Prescription—endocrine/metabolic	952	0.6	1.0	0.9	1.1
<b>Female genital system</b>	<b>4,981</b>	<b>3.4</b>	<b>5.2</b>	<b>4.8</b>	<b>5.6</b>
Female genital check-up/pap smear*	1,842	1.3	1.9	1.7	2.1
<b>Neurological</b>	<b>4,593</b>	<b>3.1</b>	<b>4.8</b>	<b>4.6</b>	<b>5.0</b>
Headache	1,559	1.1	1.6	1.5	1.8
Vertigo/dizziness	1,070	0.7	1.1	1.0	1.2
<b>Ear</b>	<b>3,452</b>	<b>2.4</b>	<b>3.6</b>	<b>3.4</b>	<b>3.8</b>
Ear pain	1,305	0.9	1.4	1.3	1.5
<b>Pregnancy &amp; family planning</b>	<b>3,115</b>	<b>2.1</b>	<b>3.2</b>	<b>3.0</b>	<b>3.5</b>
Pre/postnatal check-up*	664	0.5	0.7	0.6	0.8
Oral contraception*	663	0.5	0.7	0.6	0.8
<b>Urology</b>	2,414	1.6	2.5	2.4	2.7
<b>Eye</b>	2,405	1.6	2.5	2.4	2.6
<b>Blood</b>	1,310	0.9	1.4	1.2	1.5
<b>Male genital system</b>	1,178	0.8	1.2	1.1	1.3
<b>Social</b>	1,035	0.7	1.1	1.0	1.2
<b>Total RFEs</b>	<b>146,696</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>153.0</b>	<b>151.1</b>	<b>154.8</b>

(a) Only individual RFEs accounting for  $\geq 0.5\%$  of total RFEs are included.

(b) Figures do not total 100, as more than one RFE can be recorded at each encounter.

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

Note: RFEs—reasons for encounter; LCL—lower confidence limit; UCL—upper confidence limit; NOS—not otherwise specified; NEC—not elsewhere classified.

## Distribution of RFEs by ICPC-2 component

The distribution of patient RFEs by ICPC-2 component is presented in Table 6.4 expressed as a percentage of all RFEs and as a rate per 100 encounters with 95% confidence limits. Nearly half (44.3%) of patient RFEs were expressed in terms of symptoms or complaints (for example, 'tired', 'fever'). RFEs were described in diagnostic terms for 18.2% of RFEs (for example, 'about my diabetes', 'for my depression'). The remaining 37.5% of RFEs were described in terms of processes of care, such as requests for a health check, to renew scripts, to get a referral, to find out test results or to get a medical certificate.

**Table 6.4: Distribution of RFEs by ICPC-2 component**

ICPC-2 component	Number	Per cent of total RFEs (n = 146,696)	Rate per 100 encounters <sup>(a)</sup> (n = 95,898)	95% LCL	95% UCL
Symptoms & complaints	64,933	44.3	67.7	65.8	69.6
Diagnosis, diseases	26,659	18.2	27.8	26.3	29.3
Diagnostic & preventive procedures	24,542	16.7	25.6	24.7	26.5
Medications, treatments & therapeutics	14,434	9.8	15.1	14.3	15.8
Referrals & other RFEs	7,321	5.0	7.6	7.2	8.1
Results	6,555	4.5	6.8	6.4	7.2
Administrative	2,252	1.5	2.4	2.2	2.5
<b>Total RFEs</b>	<b>146,696</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>153.0</b>	<b>151.1</b>	<b>154.8</b>

(a) Figures do not total 100, as more than one RFE can be recorded at each encounter.

Note: RFEs—reasons for encounter; LCL—lower confidence limit; UCL—upper confidence limit.

## Most frequent patient reasons for encounter

The 30 most commonly recorded RFEs, listed in order of frequency in Table 6.5, accounted for more than half of all RFEs. In this analysis the specific ICPC-2 chapter to which an across-chapter RFE belongs is disregarded, so that, for example, 'check-up— all' includes all check-ups from all body systems irrespective of whether the type was specified.

Of the top 30 most common RFEs, 18 were descriptive of symptoms such as cough, throat and back complaints and rash. However, four of the top five RFEs reflected requests for a process of care (that is, requests for check-ups, prescriptions, test results and immunisations) and together accounted for a quarter of all RFEs (25.8%) (Table 6.5).

**Table 6.5: Most frequent patient reasons for encounter**

Patient reason for encounter	Number	Per cent of total RFEs (n = 146,696)	Rate per 100 encounters <sup>(a)</sup> (n = 95,898)	95% LCL	95% UCL
Check-up—all*	13,880	9.5	14.5	13.8	15.1
Prescription—all*	12,004	8.2	12.5	11.9	13.2
Test results*	7,321	5.0	7.6	7.2	8.1
Cough	5,992	4.1	6.2	5.8	6.7
Immunisation/vaccination—all*	4,585	3.1	4.8	4.4	5.1
Throat complaint	3,143	2.1	3.3	3.0	3.6
Back complaint*	3,041	2.1	3.2	3.0	3.4
Rash*	2,383	1.6	2.5	2.3	2.6
Upper respiratory tract infection	2,154	1.5	2.2	2.0	2.5
Fever	2,057	1.4	2.1	1.8	2.5
Hypertension/high blood pressure*	1,971	1.3	2.1	1.8	2.3
Depression*	1,954	1.3	2.0	1.9	2.2
Administrative procedure NOS	1,885	1.3	2.0	1.8	2.1
Abdominal pain*	1,682	1.1	1.8	1.6	1.9
Headache	1,559	1.1	1.6	1.5	1.8
Diarrhoea	1,388	0.9	1.4	1.3	1.6
Skin complaint	1,367	0.9	1.4	1.3	1.5
Nasal congestion/sneezing	1,337	0.9	1.4	1.2	1.6
Ear pain	1,305	0.9	1.4	1.3	1.5
Weakness/tiredness	1,302	0.9	1.4	1.2	1.5
Knee complaint	1,271	0.9	1.3	1.2	1.4
Diabetes—all*	1,214	0.8	1.3	1.1	1.4
Blood test NOS	1,132	0.8	1.2	1.0	1.3
Vertigo/dizziness	1,070	0.7	1.1	1.0	1.2
Foot/toe complaint	1,045	0.7	1.1	1.0	1.2
Anxiety*	1,044	0.7	1.1	1.0	1.2
Vomiting	1,027	0.7	1.1	1.0	1.2
Swelling*	1,019	0.7	1.1	1.0	1.2
Chest pain NOS	1,015	0.7	1.1	1.0	1.1
Shoulder complaint	971	0.7	1.0	0.9	1.1
<i>Subtotal</i>	<i>83,121</i>	<i>56.7</i>	—	—	—
<b>Total RFEs</b>	<b>146,696</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>153.0</b>	<b>151.1</b>	<b>154.8</b>

(a) Figures do not total 100, as more than one RFE can be recorded at each encounter. Also, only the most frequent RFEs are included.

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

Note: RFEs—reasons for encounter; LCL—lower confidence limit; UCL—upper confidence limit; NOS—not otherwise specified.