

5. The encounters

5.1 Overview of the dataset

Using weighted data there were 96,901 encounters from 984 GPs. There were an average 146 patient reasons for encounter described per 100 encounters and 145 problems managed. Unfortunately, the participating GPs poorly recorded status of the problem (32,089 missing). In comparison with the AMTS and other BEACH surveys, it appeared that GPs failed to record the status of old problems more often than they failed to record the status of new problems. When the missing data were removed, 48.5% of problems managed were considered new to the patient. Problems regarded by the GP as likely to be work related (irrespective of whether the encounter was covered by workers' compensation) arose at a rate of 4.0 per 100 encounters.

Medications were prescribed, advised or supplied at 109.7 per 100 encounters. The prescription rate (93.6 per 100 encounters) does not consider the number of repeats provided as part of a prescription. Patients were advised to use over the counter (OTC) medications at a similar rate (8.8 per 100 encounters) to the receipt of medications directly from the GP (7.3 per 100 encounters).

Non-pharmacological treatments were recorded less often than medications, with clinical treatments (e.g. counselling, advice or psychotherapy) occurring at a higher frequency (31.4 per 100 encounters) than procedural treatments (e.g. excise, physical therapies; 11.8 per 100 encounters).

Approximately 11 referrals per 100 encounters were made to an emergency department, hospital, specialist or allied health service. Specialist referrals were the most common (7.4 per 100 encounters), followed by those to allied health professionals (3.0 per 100 encounters). Referrals to hospitals and emergency departments were relatively rare.

Orders for a pathology test (or batch of tests, e.g. FBC, HIV) were recorded more frequently (18.1 per 100 encounters) than were referrals, while orders for imaging (e.g. X-rays, scans) occurred less often (5.2 per 100 encounters) (Table 5.1).

Table 5.1: Summary of morbidity and management: BEACH, April 1998–March 1999

Variable	Number	Rate per 100 encounters	95% LCI	95% UCI	Rate per 100 problems	95% LCI	95% UCI
General practitioners	984	..	..	..	..	..	..
Encounters	96,901	..	..	..	..	..	..
Reasons for encounter	141,766	146.3	140.8	151.8	..	..	..
Problems managed	140,824	145.3	143.5	147.2	..	..	..
New problems ^(a)	52,774	54.5	53	56	37.5	36.5	38.5
Old problems ^(a)	55,961	57.8	55.9	59.6	39.7	38.7	40.7
Work related	3,860	4.0	3.7	4.3	2.7	2.5	2.9
Medications	106,320	109.7	107.4	112	75.5	74.1	76.9
Prescribed	90,710	93.6	91.2	96.1	64.4	62.9	65.9
Advised OTC	8,538	8.8	8	9.6	6.1	5.5	6.6
GP supplied	7,072	7.3	6.3	8.3	5.0	4.3	5.7
Other treatments	41,839	43.2	41.3	45	29.7	28.5	30.9
Clinical	30,380	31.4	29.7	33	21.6	20.5	22.7
Procedural	11,458	11.8	11.2	12.5	8.1	7.7	8.6
Referrals	10,860	11.2	10.8	11.6	7.7	7.4	8
Emergency department	60	0.1	0	0.6	0.0	0	0.4
Hospital	717	0.7	0.6	0.9	0.5	0.4	0.6
Specialist	7,147	7.4	7.1	7.7	5.1	4.9	5.3
Allied health services	2,935	3.0	2.8	3.2	2.1	2	2.2
Pathology	23,872	18.1	17	19.3	12.8	12	13.5
Imaging	6,844	5.2	4.8	5.6	3.7	3.4	3.9

(a) Status of problem was missing for 32,089 problems (22.8%).

Note: Abbreviations: UCI – Upper confidence interval, LCI – Lower confidence interval

5.2 Encounter type

The distribution of encounter types shows the varied nature of general practice (Table 5.2). The funding of Australian general practice reflects this variety, with a mixture of patient contribution, a governmental rebate scheme (Medical Benefits Scheme through Medicare), payment by other government programs (e.g. Department of Veterans' Affairs, Correctional Services) and insurance schemes (e.g. workers' compensation).

Encounters can be direct consultations (the patient was seen by the GP) or indirect consultations (the patient was not seen but a clinical service was provided). Direct consultations represented 96.7% of all recorded encounters and could result in no charge, a claim to Medicare, a workers' compensation claim, or a charge to another government funding program. By far the majority (90.3%) of consultations and 93.3% of direct consultations were billed to the Medicare. This is not to say that in all cases the Medicare claim was directly made by the GP ('bulk billed'), nor does it mean that no additional amount (above the Medicare rebate) was paid by the patient.

At least 85.2% of consultations take place in the GP's consultation rooms. (Note: Some of the items grouped under other items of services could also take place in the GP's rooms.) Standard surgery consultations were the most frequent Medicare item recorded. Hospital, nursing home and home visits were rare, accounting for only 3.0% of all encounters. Worker's compensation claims represented 1.9% of all recorded encounters. This appears lower than would be expected if all work related problems (4.0 per 100 encounters and 2.7 per 100 problems) were being managed at encounters covered by workers' compensation (Table 5.1).

Indirect consultations (3.3 per 100 encounters) are those at which the patient is not seen by the GP but which generate a prescription, a referral, a certificate or other service. They were not recorded in the AMTS and are usually the result of a phone call by a patient. Indirect consultations are a free service by the GP (as they do not qualify for payment by Medicare), although they clearly generate costs to the health sector (prescriptions, referrals, etc) and contribute to patient care and problem management. Prescriptions were the most common result of an indirect consultation, occurring at 55.2 per 100 indirect consultations.

These results provide the first measured indication that free services to their patients (no charge and indirect consultations) make up approximately 5% of total clinical services provided by GPs in Australia.

Table 5.2: Types of encounter: BEACH, April 1998–March 1999

Variable	Number	Rate per 100 encounters	95% LCI	95% UCI
General practitioners	984	..	..	..
Total encounters	96,901	..	..	..
Direct consultations	88,700	96.7	96.4	97
No charge	1,390	1.5	1.1	1.9
Medicare paid	82,816	90.3	89.3	91.2
Short surgery consultations	1,241	1.4	0.9	1.8
Standard surgery consultations	70,024	76.3	75.2	77.5
Long surgery consultations	6,378	7.0	6.4	7.6
Prolonged surgery consultations	473	0.5	0	1.5
Home visits	1,604	1.8	1.2	2.3
Hospital	365	0.4	0	1.8
Nursing home	753	0.8	0	1.6
Other items	1,977	2.2	1.7	2.7
Worker's compensation	1,737	1.9	1.6	2.2
Other paid (hospital, State, etc)	3,432	3.7	1.8	5.7
Indirect consultations	3,025	3.3	2.8	3.8
Prescription	1,670	1.8	1.4	2.2
Referral	409	0.5	0.2	0.7
Certificate	115	0.1	0	0.4
Other	902	1.0	0.6	1.4
Missing	5,176	..	..	..

Note: Abbreviations: UCI – Upper confidence interval, LCI – Lower confidence interval