

6 Rural and remote medical workforce

In 1996, there were 142.8 practising medical practitioners per 100,000 population in rural and remote areas compared with 308.2 per 100,000 population in metropolitan areas. 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. Furthermore, medical schools across Australia have introduced recruitment strategies to attract more rural and Indigenous students (AMWAC & AIHW 1998).

In this section, characteristics of the medical workforce are analysed geographically using the *Rural, Remote and Metropolitan Areas Classification* of the Departments of Health and Family Services and Primary Industries.

In 1996, there were 7,556 medical practitioners who worked in a rural or remote area in their main job – 15.8% of all medical practitioners. This contrasts with the overall population distribution of 28.9% living in rural and remote areas in 1996. Features of these medical practitioners included the following.

Geographic distribution

- 2,914 (38.6%) worked in a large rural centre; 1,823 (24.1%) worked in a small rural centre; 2,215 (29.3%) worked in other rural areas; and the remaining 604 (8.0%) worked in remote areas.
- The 142.8 practising medical practitioners per 100,000 population in rural and remote areas varied across geographic region – 266.0 per 100,000 population in large rural centres; 152.6 in small rural centres; 90.7 in other rural areas; and 108.8 in remote areas. It also varied across States and Territories, from a high of 166.4 in Tasmania to a low of 109.7 in South Australia. However, the high result for Tasmania is strongly influenced by the classification of Launceston as a large rural centre rather than a metropolitan centre.
- In 1996, there were 88.2 primary care practitioners per 100,000 population (1 practitioner per 1,134 population) in rural and remote areas, compared with 121.8 primary care practitioners per 100,000 population (1 practitioner per 821 population) in metropolitan centres.

Sex

- 1,794 medical practitioners in the rural medical workforce were female. This proportion (23.7%) was similar across the different geographic regions – and across States and Territories – although higher in remote areas (28.5%).

Occupation

- Most (61.7%) practitioners working mainly in rural and remote areas were employed in primary care; 25.3% were specialists; 7.7% were hospital non-specialists; 2.4% were specialists-in-training; and the remaining 2.9% were non-clinicians. In comparison, 43.0% of all medical practitioners were working in primary care; 33.0% were specialists; 9.7% were hospital non-specialists; 9.3% were specialists-in-training; and 4.9% were non-clinicians.

- The distribution of rural practitioners across occupation differed by sex. For males, 58.9% were employed in primary care and 30.1% were specialists; while 70.6% of females were employed in primary care, 12.8% were hospital non-specialists, and 9.9% were specialists.

Work setting in main job

- 74.0% of medical practitioners employed in rural and remote areas worked in their main job in private rooms; 19.8% worked in acute care hospitals; and the remaining 6.2% were employed in other work settings. This distribution varied across geographic regions. In other rural areas, 89.0% worked in their main job in private rooms, whereas in remote areas, 51.7% worked in private rooms, 25.2% worked in acute care hospitals and 11.8% worked in Aboriginal health services.

Hours worked

- Medical practitioners employed in rural and remote areas worked an average of 49.8 hours per week. This average was higher in remote areas (52.8 hours) because 83.1% in remote areas were working full time (35 hours or more per week).

Overseas graduates

- 22.8% of rural medical practitioners in 1996 had gained their initial qualification overseas – 60.8% in the United Kingdom or Ireland, 14.7% in Asia, 8.8% in New Zealand, and the remaining 15.6% in other countries. A greater proportion of medical practitioners working in remote areas had gained an initial qualification overseas (28.8%) and a greater proportion of these had gained an initial qualification in the United Kingdom or Ireland (65.5%).

Table 23: Medical practitioners whose main job was in a rural area: region and selected characteristics, Australia, 1996

Selected characteristics	Geographic location of main job				Total	%
	Large rural centre	Small rural centre	Other rural area	Remote		
Sex						
Males	2,203	1,422	1,705	431	5,762	76.3
Females	711	401	510	172	1,794	23.7
% female	24.4	22.0	23.0	28.5	23.7	..
Occupation of main job						
Primary care practitioner	1,173	1,123	1,952	414	4,662	61.7
Hospital non-specialist	333	91	63	94	581	7.7
Specialist	1,162	528	163	60	1,914	25.3
Specialist-in-training	141	19	6	16	182	2.4
Non-clinician	105	62	31	18	217	2.9
Age (years)						
Less than 35	628	248	387	178	1,442	19.1
35-44	980	637	827	232	2,676	35.4
45-54	733	499	477	95	1,804	23.9
55-64	340	242	289	65	937	12.4
65 and over	233	197	234	33	697	9.2
% aged 65 and over	8.0	10.8	10.6	5.5	9.2	..
Average age	44.7	47.0	46.1	42.3	45.5	..
Hours worked per week						
Less than 20	191	133	193	20	537	7.1
20-34	250	227	208	52	737	9.8
35-49	767	495	523	154	1,939	25.7
50-64	1,243	690	849	263	3,045	40.3
65-79	355	176	284	76	891	11.8
80 and over	109	102	158	38	406	5.4
% employed full time	84.9	80.2	81.9	88.0	83.1	..
Average hours worked	49.6	48.5	50.4	52.8	49.8	..
Work setting						
Private rooms	1,888	1,420	1,970	312	5,591	74.0
Acute care hospital	864	306	172	152	1,494	19.8
Residential	4	3	1	2	9	0.1
Aboriginal health service	15	10	5	71	102	1.3
Non-residential facility	66	36	47	25	175	2.3
Educational institution	13	5	0	5	23	0.3
Defence forces	12	4	8	2	26	0.3
Other government	22	18	4	13	56	0.7
Other	30	19	7	23	79	1.0
Country of initial qualification						
Australia	2,300	1,340	1,765	430	5,836	77.2
New Zealand	72	35	25	21	152	2.0
United Kingdom/Ireland	378	277	278	114	1,046	13.8
Asia	69	92	79	13	253	3.4
Other countries	95	79	68	26	269	3.6
Residency status						
Australian citizen	2,710	1,642	2,043	527	6,922	91.6
Not an Australian citizen						
Permanent resident	177	159	146	49	530	7.0
Not a permanent resident	28	21	26	28	103	1.4
Rural medical practitioners per 100,000 population						
	266.0	152.6	90.7	108.8	142.9	..
Total	2,914	1,823	2,215	604	7,556	100.0

Table 24: Per cent of clinician practitioners who were female: occupation, region of main job and age, Australia, 1996

Occupation/ region of main job	Age (years)					Total
	<35	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+	
Primary care practitioner						
Capital city	52.6	43.4	28.3	18.0	12.7	34.6
Other metropolitan centre	52.7	35.5	22.1	10.8	5.0	28.0
Large rural centre	51.2	38.9	24.7	11.4	8.8	31.7
Small rural centre	40.5	32.7	18.4	17.1	10.3	26.3
Other rural area	44.0	26.7	15.6	13.1	14.0	24.5
Remote	47.7	27.7	14.9	10.6	13.6	29.0
<i>Total</i>	<i>51.0</i>	<i>39.7</i>	<i>25.9</i>	<i>16.4</i>	<i>11.9</i>	<i>32.4</i>
Hospital non-specialist						
Capital city	44.0	44.8	46.7	46.3	27.4	44.1
Other metropolitan centre	43.0	37.6	34.2	63.8	0.0	42.1
Large rural centre	50.3	40.6	49.7	44.5	21.6	48.1
Small rural centre	38.9	10.8	15.9	0.0	0.0	25.7
Other rural area	21.5	26.1	37.7	0.0	0.0	22.5
Remote	33.3	46.6	14.3	56.3	0.0	34.2
<i>Total</i>	<i>43.9</i>	<i>41.8</i>	<i>42.5</i>	<i>43.5</i>	<i>19.7</i>	<i>43.4</i>
Specialist						
Capital city	32.0	22.7	13.6	10.0	8.2	16.1
Other metropolitan centre	33.5	12.6	7.4	7.6	8.1	10.3
Large rural centre	15.8	12.5	7.0	6.0	2.1	8.8
Small rural centre	40.2	16.8	9.1	4.3	3.0	10.5
Other rural area	48.7	11.8	7.6	7.6	0.0	9.4
Remote	61.2	9.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	7.1
<i>Total</i>	<i>31.3</i>	<i>20.8</i>	<i>12.4</i>	<i>9.3</i>	<i>7.7</i>	<i>14.9</i>
Specialist-in-training						
Capital city	33.2	30.7	44.1	0.0	0.0	33.0
Other metropolitan centre	29.5	32.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	29.6
Large rural centre	29.6	17.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	26.2
Small rural centre	38.5	50.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	44.9
Other rural area	0.0	50.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	25.0
Remote	45.5	40.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	42.6
<i>Total</i>	<i>32.8</i>	<i>30.7</i>	<i>40.5</i>	<i>0.0</i>	<i>0.0</i>	<i>32.6</i>
Total						
Capital city	41.9	33.8	21.4	13.9	10.7	28.6
Other metropolitan centre	41.8	26.3	15.1	10.4	6.0	24.2
Large rural centre	43.9	27.0	14.7	9.0	6.4	23.9
Small rural centre	40.1	28.3	14.7	10.4	7.7	21.8
Other rural area	41.6	26.2	14.8	12.0	13.4	23.3
Remote	44.4	28.5	12.7	12.4	9.5	27.9
Total	42.0	32.0	19.9	13.1	10.2	27.5