

## 13 Practice nurse activity

This section investigates changes in the activities of practice nurses in association with the GP-patient encounters, for the years 2005–06, 2006–07 and 2007–08.

In November 2004, four Medicare item numbers were introduced into the MBS that allowed GPs to claim for specified tasks undertaken by a practice nurse under the direction of the GP. The recording form for the 2005–06 BEACH year was amended to allow the capture of this information.

- GPs were allowed to record multiple (up to three) Medicare item numbers where appropriate, rather than be limited to one item number.
- In the 'other treatments' section, for each problem managed, GPs were asked to tick the 'practice nurse' box if the treatment recorded was provided by the practice nurse rather than by the GP. If the box was not ticked it was assumed that the GP gave the 'other treatment'.

The survey form allowed GPs to record up to two other treatments for each problem managed at the encounter. Other treatments include all clinical and procedural treatments provided at the encounters. These groups are defined in Appendix 5.

In November 2007, a new Medicare item number was added for practice nurse services. This item, 10997, was only available to BEACH 2007–08 participants between November 2007 and March 2008 inclusive. The seven practice nurse Medicare items available during the 2007–08 BEACH data period are listed with a short description in Table 13.1.<sup>21</sup>

This section investigates changes in:

- the distribution of the Medicare items claimed for practice nurses
- treatments provided by practice nurses in association with the GP-recorded encounter
- problems for which the practice nurse provided the treatment in direct association with the GP-recorded encounters.

In Chapter 10, all treatments (other than medications) recorded by the GPs were reported, irrespective of whether they were provided by the GP or by a practice nurse. As in previous years, injections recorded in the provision of immunisations and vaccinations were not included, as these are already counted as pharmacological management. In contrast, this section, being a description of practice nurse activity, reports only the activities indicated as being conducted by a practice nurse and includes the injections for immunisation/vaccination that were not counted in Chapter 10. GPs are also instructed not to record their taking of routine clinical measurements, such as blood pressure. However, where the practice nurse undertook these activities at the consultation, and it was recorded as a practice nurse activity, they have been included in the analysis in this chapter.

When viewing these results, it must be remembered that these practice nurse data will not include activities undertaken by the practice nurse during the GP's BEACH recording period that were outside (not associated with) the recorded encounter. Such activities could include Medicare-claimable activities (for example, immunisations/vaccinations) provided under instruction from the GP but not at the time of the encounter, or provision of other services not currently claimable from Medicare (for example, dietary advice to an individual or in a group situation).

## 13.1 Practice nurse activity at GP–patient encounters

Encounters involving the practice nurse as a proportion of all recorded encounters increased significantly from 3.9% in 2005–06 to 6.0% in 2007–08. The number of problems for which the practice nurse was involved in the care provided at the encounter also increased significantly between 2005–06 (2.8%) and 2007–08 (4.1%). However, of those encounters at which the practice nurse activity was specified, the proportion said to be claimable from Medicare, remained constant over the 3 years, at about 35% (Table 13.1).

Extrapolation of these results to national Medicare claims for these years suggests that in 2007–08, practice nurses were actively involved in provision of care at 6.4 million encounters, 2.2 million more than in 2005–06. However, Medicare data suggest there were about 1.35 million more practice nurse items claimed in 2007–08 than in the 2005–06 financial year.<sup>5</sup> These results suggest that at GP–patient encounters practice nurses are providing a considerable amount of care that cannot be claimed from Medicare.

**Table 13.1: Summary of practice nurse involvement at encounter, and claims made, BEACH, 2005–06 to 2007–08**

Variable	2005–06	2006–07	2007–08
Total encounters ( <i>n</i> )	101,993	91,805	95,898
Number of encounters involving practice nurse ( <i>n</i> )	4,013	4,710	5,712
Encounters involving the practice nurse as a proportion of total encounters (95% CI)	3.9% (3.5–4.4)	5.1% (4.5–5.7)	6.0% (5.4–6.5)
Extrapolated national estimated number of GP–patient encounters involving practice nurse ( <i>n</i> )	3.9 million	5.3 million	6.4 million
Total problems managed ( <i>n</i> )	149,088	136,333	145,078
Problems managed with practice nurse involvement	4,110	4,922	5,909
Problems involving the practice nurse as a proportion of total problems (95% CI)	2.8% (2.4–3.1)	3.6% (3.2–4.1)	4.1% (3.7–4.5)
Number of practice nurse items recorded ( <i>n</i> )	1,696	1,835	2,073
Number of encounters at which 1 or more practice nurse item numbers were claimable ( <i>n</i> )	1,696	1,823	2,047
Practice nurse claimable encounters as a proportion of total encounters	1.7%	2.0%	2.1%
Proportion of encounters involving practice nurse that were claimable from Medicare (95% CI)	34.9% (30.6–38.9)	37.5% (33.2–41.7)	35.8% (31.5–37.8)

Note: CI—confidence interval.

## 13.2 Distribution of practice nurse item numbers claimed at encounters

The number of practice nurse item numbers claimed per 100 GP–patient encounters increased from 1.7 per 100 in 2005–06 to 2.1 (Table 13.1) per 100 in 2007–08, but this did not constitute a statistically significant change. Extrapolation of these results suggests that the BEACH sample represent about 1.7 million claimed practice nurse items in 2007–08 and about 2.2 million in 2007–08. Medicare data show there were 3.2 million such claims in 2005–06 and 4.6 million in 2007–08. In turn, this suggests that the BEACH samples represent about 50% of the practice nurse activity claimed from Medicare in these years<sup>5</sup>, and that the

other 50% of services claimed for the practice nurse were conducted independently of the recorded consultation.

The distribution of practice nurse item numbers claimed for work associated with the BEACH encounters changed little; about two-thirds accounted for by immunisation/vaccination and about one-third by wound treatment, in each of the 3 data years. The combined uptake of all cervical smear items numbers did increase, from 0.5 in 2004–05 to 0.9 in 2007–08 (Table 13.2).

**Table 13.2: Distribution of practice nurse item numbers recorded at encounter**

Medicare item number	Short descriptor	Per cent of total (95% CI)		
		2005–06 (n = 1,696)	2006–07 (n = 1,835)	2007–08 (n = 2,073)
10993	Immunisation	69.5 (63.8–75.3)	66.8 (61.5–72.2)	64.1 (59.6–68.6)
10994 <sup>(a)</sup>	Cervical smear and preventive checks	N/A	0.2 (0.0–0.5)	0.2 (0.0–0.4)
10995 <sup>(a)</sup>	Cervical smear and preventive checks—women 20–69 years, no smear in past 4 years	N/A	0.1 (0.0–0.2)	0.1 (0.0–0.2)
10996	Wound treatment (other than normal aftercare)	30.0 (24.3–35.7)	32.6 (27.2–40.0)	34.4 (30.0–38.8)
10997 <sup>(b)</sup>	Service provided to a person with a chronic disease by a practice nurse or registered Aboriginal Health Worker	N/A	N/A	0.7 (0.2–1.2)
10998 <sup>(c)</sup>	Cervical smear	0	0.1 (0.0–0.3)	0.3 (0.2–0.5)
10999 <sup>(c)</sup>	Cervical smear—women 20–69 years, no smear in past 4 years	0.5 (0.0–0.9)	0.2 (0.0–0.4)	0.3 (0.0–0.8)
<b>Total practice nurse item numbers—rate per 100 total encounters</b>		<b>1.5</b> <b>(1.2–1.8)</b>	<b>1.9</b> <b>(1.6–2.2)</b>	<b>2.0</b> <b>(1.7–2.2)</b>

(a) Item number introduced in November 2006.

(b) Item number introduced in November 2007.

(c) Item numbers introduced in November 2004, but broadened in 2006, so they are not limited to services in rural areas.

Note: N/A—Not applicable.

### 13.3 Treatments provided by practice nurses

The number of procedures involving practice nurses at encounters rose significantly, from 3.6 per 100 encounters in 2005–06 to 5.5 per 100 in 2007–08. Extrapolation to national estimates suggest that practice nurses were involved in procedural work on about 5.9 million occasions nationally in 2007–08. However, their activities in the areas of other investigations and provision of clinical treatments (such as advice and health education) at the GP–patient encounters remained infrequent (Table 13.3).

**Table 13.3: Summary of treatments provided by practice nurse**

Treatment	Per cent of each activity that was performed/assisted by the practice nurse (95% CI)			Rate per 100 encounters (95% CI)		
	2005–06	2006–07	2007–08	2005–06 (n = 101,993)	2006–07 (n = 91,805)	2007–08 (n = 95,898)
Procedural treatments <sup>(a)</sup>	21.7 (19.2–24.1)	27.1 (24.5–29.8)	28.9 (26.7–31.2)	3.6 (3.1–4.1)	4.7 (4.1–5.3)	5.5 (5.1–6.1)
Clinical treatments	0.7 (0.5–0.9)	1.5 (0.9–2.2)	1.3 (1.0–1.6)	0.2 (0.1–0.3)	0.5 (0.3–0.6)	0.5 (0.4–0.6)
Other investigations	39.7 (33.8–45.7)	42.1 (35.9–48.4)	41.5 (35.6–47.4)	0.4 (0.3–0.5)	0.5 (0.4–0.6)	0.5 (0.1–0.7)
<b>All other treatments</b>	<b>9.0</b> <b>(7.9–10.1)</b>	<b>11.8</b> <b>(10.4–13.2)</b>	<b>11.9</b> <b>(10.8–13.0)</b>	<b>4.2</b> <b>(3.7–4.8)</b>	<b>5.7</b> <b>(4.9–6.4)</b>	<b>6.5</b> <b>5.9–7.2)</b>

(a) Procedural treatments here include all injections for immunisations/vaccinations. These are not included in the summary of the content of encounter in Table 5.1, summary of management in Table 8.1 or in the analyses of other treatments in Chapter 10, because the immunisation/vaccination is already counted as a prescription or GP-supplied medication.

## 13.4 Individual treatments most frequently involving practice nurses

In terms of procedural treatments, increases were apparent in two specific areas: check-ups and INR blood tests. In 2005–06, these two actions could not be coded by the data entry staff as specific procedures. In 2006–07 such codes were introduced as possible practice nurse activities in response to the data recorded by the GPs in 2005–06. In 2007–08, practice nurses-conducted check-ups were recorded at a rate of 6.1 per 100 practice nurse encounters (or 0.36 per 100 total GP-patient encounters) suggesting an extrapolated figure of about 360,000 check-ups conducted by practice nurses nationally.

In the area of clinical treatments only one treatment demonstrated significant change in its rate between 2005–06 and 2007–08. Administrative procedures/documentation events by practice nurses at GP-patient encounters more than doubled between 2005–06 and 2007–08.

**Table 13.4: Most frequent treatments provided by practice nurses**

Treatment	Rate per 100 encounters involving practice nurse <sup>(a)</sup> (95% CI)		
	2005–06 (n = 4,013)	2006–07 (n = 4,710)	2007–08 (n = 5,712)
<b>Procedural treatments</b>	<b>92.0</b> <b>(89.5–94.4)</b>	<b>91.3</b> <b>(88.5–94.1)</b>	<b>93.2</b> <b>(91.5–94.8)</b>
Local injection/infiltration*	41.0 (36.6–45.4)	37.3 (33.0–41.6)	37.7 (34.7–40.7)
Dressing/pressure/compression/tamponade*	23.7 (21.3–26.2)	22.4 (19.8–24.9)	20.7 (18.7–22.8)
Incision/drainage/flushing/aspiration/removal body fluid*	8.1 (6.2–10.0)	8.8 (6.7–11.0)	6.8 (5.6–7.9)
Check-up—practice nurse*	NAv	4.0 (2.3–5.6)	6.1 (4.8–7.4)
Repair/fixation-suture/cast/prosthetic device (apply/remove)*	6.4 (5.0–7.8)	6.0 (5.0–7.0)	5.0 (4.2–5.7)
INR test	NAv	1.8 (1.0–2.6)	4.9 (3.6–6.2)
Excision/removal tissue/biopsy/destruction/debride/cauterise*	7.4 (5.6–9.2)	5.7 (4.2–7.2)	4.9 (3.8–5.9)
Urine test*	1.4 (0.8–2.0)	1.4 (0.8–2.0)	2.1 (1.3–3.0)
Other procedures/minor surgery NEC*	0.9 (0.5–1.3)	1.0 (0.7–1.4)	1.5 (1.0–2.0)
Glucose test	0.7 (0.3–1.1)	1.0 (0.4–1.5)	1.0 (0.7–1.3)
Physical medicine/rehabilitation*	0.9 (0.4–1.5)	0.6 (3–0.9)	0.6 (0.2–1.1)
Pregnancy test*	0.3 (0.1–0.6)	0.3 (0.1–0.5)	0.5 (0.3–0.8)
Pap smear	0.3 (0.0–0.6)	0.6 (0.2–0.9)	0.5 (0.3–0.8)
<b>Clinical treatments</b>	<b>5.2</b> <b>(3.7–6.7)</b>	<b>8.9</b> <b>(5.6–12.1)</b>	<b>7.7</b> <b>(6.2–9.2)</b>
Other admin/document*	0.7 (0.4–1.0)	1.1 (0.7–1.6)	2.0 (1.4–2.6)
Advice/education*	0.9 (0.4–1.3)	1.5 (0.6–2.4)	1.4 (0.8–2.1)
Advice/education—treatment*	0.2 (0.1–0.4)	0.9 (0.5–1.3)	0.6 (0.4–0.8)
Counselling—problem*	0.9 (0.2–1.5)	0.8 (0.3–1.3)	0.6 (0.3–0.8)
Counselling/advice—nutrition/weight*	0.6 (0.2–0.9)	1.2 (0.2–2.1)	0.5 (0.1–0.9)
<b>Other investigations</b>	<b>10.3</b> <b>(8.3–12.2)</b>	<b>10.0</b> <b>(7.8–12.2)</b>	<b>9.1</b> <b>(7.5–10.8)</b>
Electrical tracings*	5.4 (4.1–6.7)	4.5 (3.7–5.2)	5.2 (4.3–6.1)
Physical function tests*	3.9 (2.6–5.3)	4.3 (2.8–5.7)	3.5 (2.3–4.7)
<b>All practice nurse activities at the encounter</b>	<b>107.4</b> <b>(105.0–108.9)</b>	<b>110.2</b> <b>(107.7–112.8)</b>	<b>110.0</b> <b>(108.4–111.6)</b>

(a) Figures do not total 100, as more than one treatment can be performed by a practice nurse at each encounter, and only those individual treatments accounting for  $\geq 0.5\%$  of total treatments by practice nurse are included.

\* Includes multiple ICPC-2 or ICPC-2 PLUS codes (see Appendix 5).

Note: CI—confidence interval; NEC—not elsewhere classified; NAv—data not available; INR—International Normalised Ratio blood test.

## 13.5 Problems managed with practice nurse involvement

The problems managed most often with the assistance of a practice nurse in association with the consultation were immunisation/vaccination, followed by laceration/cut, chronic skin ulcer, diabetes, and general check-up. There was little change in the rate of nurse involvement in most problems managed. The exception was their work associated with atrial fibrillation/flutter. Nurses were involved in the management of this problem at more than twice the rate in 2007–08 than in 2005–06. This increase in activity is clearly related to the increase in the number of INR tests (noted above) over the same period, as these tests are used for patients taking warfarin, usually those with atrial fibrillation (Table 13.5).

**Table 13.5: The most common problems managed with the involvement of practice nurse**

Problem managed	Rate per 100 encounters involving practice nurse (95% CI) <sup>(a)</sup>		
	2005–06 (n = 4,013)	2006–07 (n = 4,710)	2007–08 (n = 5,712)
Immunisation/vaccination—all*	30.9 (26.9–34.9)	30.8 (26.5–35.0)	29.5 (26.7–32.2)
Laceration/cut	6.4 (5.0–7.8)	6.2 (5.2–7.2)	6.0 (5.0–7.0)
Chronic ulcer skin (including varicose ulcer)	6.8 (5.6–8.0)	6.0 (4.9–7.1)	4.7 (3.7–5.6)
General check-up*	2.5 (1.7–3.3)	3.1 (2.2–3.9)	4.3 (3.1–5.4)
Diabetes—all*	1.7 (1.0–2.4)	2.5 (1.8–3.1)	3.0 (2.4–3.7)
Atrial fibrillation/flutter	1.2 (0.6–1.7)	1.4 (0.8–2.0)	2.8 (2.0–3.6)
Excessive ear wax	2.2 (1.6–2.9)	3.0 (2.4–3.6)	2.8 (2.2–3.4)
Malignant neoplasm skin	3.2 (2.3–4.2)	2.9 (2.1–3.8)	2.6 (1.8–3.3)
Hypertension*	1.1 (0.6–1.5)	1.6 (1.0–2.2)	1.8 (1.2–2.3)
Skin infection, post-traumatic	1.8 (1.3–2.3)	1.7 (1.2–2.2)	1.6 (1.0–2.1)
Asthma	1.5 (1.0–2.0)	2.3 (1.6–3.0)	1.2 (0.9–1.6)
Abrasion/scratch/blister	1.2 (0.7–1.6)	0.7 (0.4–1.0)	1.2 (0.6–1.7)
Repair/fixate-suture/cast/prosthetic device (apply/remove)	1.2 (0.7–1.8)	1.2 (0.7–1.6)	1.1 (0.8–1.5)
Burns/scalds	0.9 (0.5–1.3)	1.2 (0.8–1.7)	1.1 (0.8–1.4)
Skin complaint	1.2 (0.7–1.7)	1.2 (0.8–1.7)	1.0 (0.7–1.3)
Contraception, other than oral	1.1 (0.6–1.5)	0.5 (0.3–0.8)	0.9 (0.6–1.2)
Fracture	1.1 (0.7–1.5)	1.0 (0.6–1.5)	0.8 (0.5–1.0)
Injury skin NEC	1.0 (0.6–1.4)	0.6 (0.3–0.9)	0.4 (0.2–0.6)
<b>Total problems</b>	<b>102.4</b> <b>(101.7–103.2)</b>	<b>104.5</b> <b>(103.3–105.8)</b>	<b>103.4</b> <b>(102.7–104.2)</b>

(a) Rate of nurse provision of treatment for selected problem per 100 encounters.

\* Includes multiple ICPC-2 or ICPC-2 PLUS codes (see Appendix 5).

Note: CI—confidence interval; incl—including; NEC—not elsewhere classified.