

# 3. The general practitioners

## 3.1 Results of recruitment

Telephone contact was established with 2,562 (90.2%) of the 2,839 general practitioners with whom contact was attempted. Of the 277 (9.8% of those approached) who could not be contacted, there were 71 for whom no phone number could be established while 145 had moved, retired or died and 30 were unavailable (e.g. overseas, on maternity leave). A further 31 were unable to be contacted after six calls. Of the remaining 2,562 available practitioners, 1,168 (45.6%) agreed to participate, but 184 (6.5%) failed to comply. The final participating sample was 984 practitioners, representing 38.4% of those contacted and available, and 34.7% of those for whom contact was attempted (Table 3.1).

**Table 3.1: Recruitment and participation**

	Number	% of approached (N=2,839)	% of contacts established (N=2,562)
Letter sent and phone contact attempted	2,839	100.0	..
No contact	277	9.8	..
No phone number	71	2.5	..
Moved/retired/deceased	145	5.1	..
Unavailable	30	1.1	..
No contact after 6 calls	31	1.1	..
Telephone contact established	2,562	90.2	100.0
Declined to participate	1,394	49.1	54.4
Agreed but withdrew	184	6.5	7.2
Agreed and completed	984	34.7	38.4

## 3.2 The participating GPs

GP profile questionnaires were returned by all of the 984 participants, although some were incomplete. Of the 984 participants 70.0% were male and 57.3% were aged 45 years or older. Three-quarters (75.9%) of the GPs had been in general practice for more than 10 years, and only 12.3% could be regarded as practising part time (fewer than six sessions per week). One in five respondents were in solo practice (17.9%). The majority (76.5%) had graduated in Australia and more than one-quarter (27.3%) were Fellows of the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners. Only 11.3% of GPs stated that more than 50% of their consultations were in languages other than English. There were 21 GPs (2.2%) who were currently in the RACGP training program and almost a third (30.4%) who had completed it (Table 3.2).

**Table 3.2: GP characteristics**

<b>GP characteristic</b>	<b>Number<sup>(a)</sup></b>	<b>% of GPs (N=984)</b>
Sex	..	..
Male	689	70.0
Female	295	30.0
Age (missing=4)	..	..
<35 years	62	6.3
35–44 years	356	36.3
45–54 years	315	32.1
55+ years	247	25.2
Years in general practice (missing=12)	..	..
<2 years	8	0.8
2–5 years	59	6.1
6–10 years	167	17.2
11–19 years	328	33.7
20+ years	410	42.2
Sessions per week (missing=12)	..	..
<5 per week	120	12.3
6–10 per week	666	68.5
11+ per week	186	19.1
Size of practice (missing=62)	..	..
Solo	165	17.9
2–4 GPs	398	43.2
5+ GPs	359	38.9
Place of graduation (missing=4)	..	..
Australia	750	76.5
UK	88	9.0
Asia	84	8.6
Europe	24	2.4
Africa	15	1.5
New Zealand	11	1.1
Other	8	0.9
More than 50% consultations in languages other than English	111	11.3
Currently in RACGP training program	21	2.2
Completed RACGP training program	289	30.4
Member of AMA	441	44.8
Fellow of RACGP	263	27.3
Member of RACGP	411	41.8

(a) Missing data removed.

### 3.3 Comparison between participating and non-participating GPs

In any sampling study of this type the question of the extent to which the final participating GPs represent the initial random sample must be investigated. Some information about each of the GPs drawn in the initial sample was provided by the Department of Health and Aged Care (DHAC) for this purpose. These data included the number of general practice Medicare items claimed in the previous 12 months and this is referred to in this analysis as 'activity level'.

In Table 3.3 the characteristics of the final participating GPs and all other GPs drawn in the initial sample are compared, utilising DHAC elements. It is notable that there are considerable discrepancies between the DHAC information about participants (columns 2 & 3, Table 3.3) and that self-reported by these GPs (Table 3.2). While these discrepancies introduce questions about the reliability of the DHAC GP characteristic data, there is no reason to believe that the accuracy of the DHAC data should differ for the participants and non-participants.

The chi square statistic (at the 5% level) was used to test the significance of differences between the two groups. There was no significant difference between participants and non-participants in terms of gender, place of graduation and the Rural Remote Metropolitan classification (RRMA). The age distribution for participants and non-participants was significantly different, with GPs under the age of 35 years being under-represented in the participant population. This age difference would explain the difference in the years since graduation of participants compared to non-participants. The distributions of GPs by State were also demonstrated to be significantly different, a greater proportion of participants coming from the eastern States, the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory, and a lesser proportion from the other States.

There was a small but statistical difference in activity level between participants and non-participants. Internal analysis has shown that younger doctors have higher activity levels in comparison to other ages, and as previously mentioned, this group was under-represented in the participant group.

**Table 3.3: Characteristics of participating and non-participating general practitioners**

GP Characteristics	Participants (N=984)		Non-participants (N=1,578)	
	Number <sup>(a)</sup>	% of N	Number <sup>(a)</sup>	% of N
Sex ( $\chi^2=1.80$ , $p=0.179$ )	..	..	..	..
Male	693	70.4	1150	72.9
Female	291	29.6	428	27.1
Age ( $\chi^2=13.4$ , $p=0.002$ )	..	..	..	..
<35 years	54	5.8	138	9.4
35–44 years	322	34.7	447	30.6
45–54 years	301	32.5	515	35.2
55+ years	250	27.0	362	24.8
Missing	57	..	116	..

(continued)

**Table 3.3 (continued): Characteristics of participating and non-participating general practitioners**

GP Characteristics	Participants (N=984)		Non-participants (N=1,578)	
	Number <sup>(a)</sup>	% of N	Number <sup>(a)</sup>	% of N
Years since graduation ( $\chi^2=13.4$ , $p=0.046$ )	..	..	..	..
2–5 years	6	0.6	15	0.9
6–10 years	52	5.3	121	7.7
>10 years	915	94.0	1,437	91.4
Missing	11	..	..	..
Place of graduation ( $\chi^2=1.4$ , $p=0.228$ )	..	..	..	..
Australia	759	77.1	1,249	79.1
Overseas	225	22.9	329	20.9
State ( $\chi^2=22.3$ , $p=0.002$ )	..	..	..	..
New South Wales	364	36.7	525	33.3
Victoria	239	24.3	387	24.5
Queensland	184	18.7	276	17.5
South Australia	74	7.5	159	10.1
Western Australia	73	7.4	172	10.9
Tasmania	22	2.2	38	2.4
Australian Capital Territory	17	1.7	13	0.8
Northern Territory	11	1.1	8	0.5
RRMA ( $\chi^2=4.8$ , $p=0.689$ )	..	..	..	..
Capital	669	68.0	1,106	70.1
Other metropolitan	75	7.6	129	8.2
Large rural	60	6.1	76	4.8
Small rural	57	5.8	89	5.6
Other rural	106	10.8	155	9.8
Remote centre	5	0.5	11	0.7
Other remote	6	0.6	6	0.4
Activity ( $\chi^2=6.6$ , $p=0.036$ )	..	..	..	..
1,501–3,000 services in previous year	164	16.7	209	13.2
3,001–6,000	418	42.4	727	46.1
6,001+	402	40.9	642	40.7

(a) Missing data removed