

**Bettering the Evaluation
And Care of Health
A Study of General Practice
Activity**

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare is an independent health and welfare statistics and information agency. The Institute's mission is to inform community discussion and decision making through national leadership in the development and provision of authoritative and timely information on the health and welfare of Australians.

The General Practice Statistics and Classification Unit is a collaborating Unit of the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and the University of Sydney, situated within the Family Medicine Research Unit at Westmead Hospital. It fulfils the obligation of the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare to collect statistics regarding general practitioners, their patients and their patients' care.

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BEACH

Bettering the Evaluation And Care of Health A study of general practice activity

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Sharon Scahill, Fiona Horn, Alice Bhasale**

Six-month interim report

April 1999

A joint report by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and the University of Sydney

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Foreword

General practitioners play an important role in the provision of primary health care services and in providing access for their patients to pharmaceuticals, specialists, hospitals and other health care services. The substantially uncapped public expenditure on the services they provide comprised 7.9% of government health expenditure and 5.4% of total health expenditure in Australia in 1996–97.

Despite this, there have been no regular data collections on the activities of general practitioners, with the limited Medicare data being the sole source of national, routinely collected information. The only national data available on the ‘casemix’ of general practitioners, that is, on the characteristics of their patients, the problems managed, and the nature of the management, have been from previous relatively short term studies, now of mainly historical interest.

The first national survey of general practice in Australia was conducted in 1962–63 when 85 general practitioners throughout the country recorded information about every patient seen for a 12-month period. The second national survey, information was recorded for one week several times per year between 1969 and 1974, with over 1,000 general practitioners taking part at various times. The most recent study was the Australian Morbidity and Treatment Survey undertaken by the Department of General Practice at the University of Sydney in 1990–91, with 495 general practitioners throughout Australia each recording data for two weeks on a rotating basis throughout the year.

National health information has improved over the years, both in quality and timeliness, but general practice had remained a substantial gap. This was highlighted in the 1995 National Health Information Development Plan, in which the development and collection of standardised information on primary and other non-institutional health care encounter data was identified as one of the eight highest-priority health information issues. In response, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and the University of Sydney are collaborating with a national, continuing survey of general practitioner activity, titled ‘Bettering the Evaluation And Care of Health’, or *BEACH*. The survey is being undertaken by the General Practice Statistics and Classification Unit, a collaborating unit of the Institute, located within the Department of General Practice at the University.

BEACH builds on the experience of the Australian Morbidity and Treatment Survey and more recent studies in the western Sydney area and in Victoria. The AMTS data proved to be an essential source of data of the activity of general practitioners and the characteristics of their patients but are now out of date. *BEACH* provides an invaluable source of timely data to describe general practice activity and inform improvements in primary health care service provision. This interim report of the project describes the project’s methods in detail and includes a summary of the data collected during the first six months of the collection.

BEACH’s financing is innovative, with funding provided through a consortium of government agencies and pharmaceutical companies. We are grateful for the support of these organisations, without which the project would not be possible.

We trust that this report will provide a useful introduction to the project and invite comments from readers on its use in meeting their needs for information about general practice activity.

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April 1999

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