

8 Aboriginal health service employment

Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples experience much poorer health than the general population, and have a life expectancy at birth more than 15 years less than that for other Australians (AIHW 1998, pp. 28–34).

In 1997, AIHW and the National Centre of Epidemiology and Population Health conducted the first comprehensive analysis of expenditure on health services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This found that Indigenous peoples receive health services through Medicare and the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme at only one-quarter of the rate per person for other Australians. Offsetting this to some extent are services from Indigenous health organisations.

In the work setting question in the AIHW annual national medical labour force survey, doctors are asked to identify whether they are employed in an Aboriginal health service in their main or a second or third job. This chapter presents data on the characteristics of doctors who identified that they were employed in an Aboriginal health service. The AIHW survey does not collect data on Aboriginality because the numbers are too small to protect practitioner confidentiality in tabulations. The AIHW will publish data from the 1996 ABS Census of Population and Housing on the numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander doctors in Australia at a later date.

There were 547 medical practitioners in 1996 who indicated that the employment setting of their main, second or third job was an Aboriginal health service. Features of these medical practitioners included the following.

Geographic distribution

- The distribution of Aboriginal health service clinicians in some States and Territories differed significantly from the distribution of the Indigenous population: 11.3% of these clinicians were in Queensland with 26.2% of the Indigenous population; 13.2% were in Victoria with 5.9% of the population; 12.4% were in South Australia with 5.7% of the population. The other States and Territories had approximately the same proportion of Aboriginal health service clinicians as of Indigenous population.
- 63.0% of Aboriginal health service medical practitioners were located in a metropolitan area where 36.2% of the Indigenous population was located.

Sex

- 209 (38.2%) of the 547 medical practitioners employed in an Aboriginal health service were female. The female proportion was between 28% and 35% across all States and Territories except the Northern Territory (54.9%) and Queensland (50.4%).

Occupation

- 49.2% of Aboriginal health service medical practitioners were primary care practitioners; 36.4% were specialists; 4.4% were specialists-in-training; 6.4% were hospital non-specialists; and the remaining 3.6% worked in a non-clinical field including administration and education.

Age

- The average age of these medical practitioners was 41.7 years. This average varied across States and Territories, from a high of 44.5 years in South Australia to a low of 38.2 years in Western Australia and the Northern Territory.

Hours worked

- Medical practitioners in an Aboriginal health service worked an average of 22.1 hours per week mainly because only 45.5% of these doctors were working in such a service as their main job. Average hours worked varied among States and Territories, from a low of 14.0 hours per week in Victoria and 15.0 hours per week in South Australia to a high of 30.4 hours per week in the Northern Territory. Most practitioners (60.5%) worked fewer than 35 hours a week in the Aboriginal health service.

Overseas graduates

- 83.7% of Aboriginal health service medical practitioners had gained their initial qualification in Australia. Of those who had gained an initial qualification overseas, 44.4% qualified in the United Kingdom or Ireland.

Aboriginal health service as a main job

- There were 249 medical practitioners who worked in an Aboriginal health service in their main job in 1996.
- 46.1% were female.
- 58.5% were primary care practitioners; 19.3% were specialists; 9.7% were hospital non-specialists; 7.3% were specialists-in-training; and the remaining 5.2% worked in a non-clinical field including administration and education.
- The average age of these medical practitioners was 39.1 years.
- 56.5% were employed in their main job as an Aboriginal health service medical practitioner in a metropolitan area.
- Most medical practitioners whose main job was in an Aboriginal health service (71.9%) worked 35 or more hours per week. The average was 38.1 hours per week in 1996.
- 82.3% of medical practitioners working in an Aboriginal health service in their main job had gained their initial qualification in Australia. Of those who initially qualified overseas, 48.8% had qualified in the United Kingdom or Ireland.

Table 28: Medical practitioners employed in an Aboriginal health service: selected characteristics, States and Territories, 1996

Selected characteristics	NSW	Vic	Qld	WA	SA	Tas	ACT	NT	Total	%
Occupation										
Clinician	119	69	60	92	66	25	11	85	527	96.4
Primary care practitioner	48	27	31	48	33	6	5	72	269	49.2
Hospital non-specialist	9	0	9	9	2	0	3	3	35	6.4
Specialist	54	37	19	31	32	13	3	10	199	36.4
Specialist-in-training	7	6	1	4	0	5	0	0	24	4.4
Non-clinician	12	3	1	0	1	0	0	2	20	3.6
Geographic location										
Metropolitan	103	55	38	45	52	13	11	27	344	63.0
Non-metropolitan	27	17	24	48	16	11	0	59	202	37.0
% metropolitan	79.2	76.2	61.6	48.5	76.2	53.8	100.0	31.5	63.0	..
Sex										
Males	90	47	31	63	44	18	7	39	338	61.8
Females	41	25	31	30	24	7	4	48	209	38.2
% female	31.0	34.7	50.4	31.9	35.5	28.4	36.4	54.9	38.2	..
Age (years)										
Average age	42.9	43.8	41.5	38.2	44.5	41.8	43.4	38.2	41.7	..
Less than 35	32	16	13	25	10	7	1	33	137	25.1
35-44	35	29	27	40	27	11	7	33	210	38.4
45-54	34	15	12	17	21	5	1	12	118	21.6
55 and over	29	12	9	10	9	1	2	9	82	14.9
Hours worked per week										
Less than 20	58	45	30	35	43	12	6	14	242	44.3
20-34	18	13	7	8	9	2	0	31	88	16.2
35-49	21	13	16	30	6	7	2	23	119	21.8
50-64	30	2	9	11	9	2	2	12	77	14.1
65-79	3	0	0	5	0	2	0	4	14	2.5
80 and over	2	0	0	3	0	0	0	2	6	1.1
% employed full time	42.1	20.7	39.5	52.8	23.1	45.2	42.4	47.9	39.5	..
Country of initial qualification										
Australia	113	65	51	73	56	22	9	68	457	83.7
New Zealand	3	0	2	2	0	0	0	7	13	2.5
UK/Ireland	3	6	8	13	2	1	0	7	40	7.2
Asia	7	0	0	2	9	0	0	3	21	3.9
Other countries	5	1	0	2	2	1	1	2	15	2.7
Residency status										
Australian citizen	128	69	54	84	65	25	11	80	514	94.1
Not Australian citizen										
Permanent resident	1	3	5	2	3	0	0	7	22	4.0
Not permanent	1	0	3	6	0	0	0	0	10	1.9
Total	131	72	62	92	68	25	11	87	547	100.0
Practitioners per 100,000 Indigenous pop.										
	118.9	319.7	58.7	164.4	307.2	160.2	354.5	166.9	141.7	

(a) All medical practitioners who reported working in an Aboriginal health service in a main, second or third job.