



Better Evaluation and Care of Health (BEACH) is a continuous, national survey of general practice activity in Australia in which ever changing random samples of about 1000 GPs per year take part. It commenced in 1998.

Preventive activities in general practice

How much preventive health care do general practitioners provide?

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The BEACH team finds that most researchers think of prevention in terms of immunisations and health education, but this is only part of the preventive activities that general practitioners provide. What can BEACH tell us about the preventive health activities of GPs between 2000 and 2006?

Primary prevention activities: immunisations and health education

Primary prevention health care aims to reduce the 'susceptibility of persons to disease'.¹ Immunisations fall into this category, and GPs provide about five immunisations or vaccinations per 1000 patient encounters, amounting to about 4.6 million such activities each year across Australia.

Consultations in which GPs performed a checkup, did not prescribe medication and did not manage a chronic problem were considered to be preventive health care activities, and these accounted for about 3 percent of the 94 million GP-patient encounters claimed through Medicare per year between 2000 and 2006 (about 2.8 million each year across the country). In about one-third of these encounters, the GP provided health instruction – another common form of primary prevention.

Secondary prevention: early detection

Secondary prevention activities – detecting and diagnosing disease 'so that treatments can be started before irreversible damage occurs'¹ – are more difficult to measure. General practitioners diagnose new chronic conditions in 8.3 percent of encounters (about 7.8 million times each year

across the country), but there is no way of measuring whether or not such detection is in fact 'early'. There would be other problems managed by GPs which are labeled in terms of symptoms but are under investigation to eliminate or identify a formal diagnosis. These could also be classed as secondary prevention activities, but second guessing the final diagnosis is impossible from BEACH data.

Tertiary prevention: ongoing care and managing disease

Tertiary prevention is the 'management of established disease so as to minimise disability'.¹ This has been defined more specifically as 'measures aimed at softening the impact of long term disease and disability by eliminating or reducing impairment, disability and handicap, minimising suffering; and maximising potential years of useful life'.²

General practitioners provide ongoing care of previously diagnosed chronic disease (as defined by O'Halloran et al)³ in about one-third of all patient encounters (or about 31 million encounters nationally each year). This tertiary preventive care is provided through medication prescriptions (eg. for controlling hypertension and

hypercholesterolaemia in patients with and without other complicating morbidity such as diabetes, or for management of chronic disease such as osteoporosis to reduce impairment, disability and handicap). They provide palliative care (minimising suffering) to those with terminal diseases.

Other preventive activity

Some preventive activities cannot be easily defined as primary, secondary or tertiary. Such interventions include GP advice and counselling in relation to general lifestyle, smoking, alcohol, exercise, diet and sexual safety. This type of advice is provided in 11 percent of patient encounters (about 10 million encounters across the country each year) and could either be considered primary prevention or – when they are provided as part of the management of chronic disease – as either secondary or tertiary activities.

General practice is the first port of call for medical care in Australia, and these results show that by offering immunisations and health education, by diagnosing new chronic conditions and by providing ongoing care, GPs play an extensive role in providing primary, secondary and tertiary preventive health care. ♦

General practitioners provided primary preventive health care at about 2.8 million patient encounters each year between 2000 and 2006

1. McWhinney IR. A textbook of family medicine. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.
2. Last JM (ed). A dictionary of epidemiology. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
3. O'Halloran J, Miller GC, Britt H. Defining chronic conditions for primary care with ICPC-2. Fam Pract 2004;21(4):381–386.