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Work related encounters in general practice

The BEACH program, a continuous national study of general practice activity in Australia, gives us an overview of encounters at which work related problems were managed. This synopsis provides a backdrop against which articles in this issue of *Australian Family Physician* can be further considered.

General practitioner participants in BEACH are asked to indicate which problems they consider to be work related. We examined encounters recorded between April 2004 and March 2006 that had at least one work related problem managed. There were 5181 work related encounters representing 2.6% of all encounters; 77% of work related encounters were claimable through Workers' Compensation. There were 6870 problems managed at work related encounters and of these, 5376 were work related problems.

Gender and age of patients

Male patients at work related encounters was higher than average for BEACH (58% compared with 42%). Gender specific rates showed males twice as likely to be represented at these encounters (3.7 per 100 total encounters with males and 1.9 per 100 encounters with females).

Age distribution at work related encounters reflected workforce age, with 43% aged 25–44 years, and 44% aged 45–64 years. Almost 10% were in the 15–24 age group and 3% were aged 65 years and over. Age specific rates were highest among patients 25–44 years of age, at a rate of 4.7 per 100 encounters.

Reasons for encounter

Back complaint was the most common reason for encounter (18 per 100 of these encounters). Unspecified administrative procedure was the reason stated at almost 1 in 10 encounters.

Work related problems managed

Musculoskeletal problems accounted for almost two-thirds of work related problems. Skin problems and psychological problems each accounted for about 1 in 10 work related problems. Individually, back complaint was the most

common work related problem, managed at a rate of 17 per 100 work related encounters. Sprain/strain was the also common, managed at 12 per 100 of these encounters. The most common skin problems were laceration/cut and other skin injuries. Depression and acute stress reaction were both common psychological problems managed.

Medications

The rate of medications prescribed, advised over-the-counter or supplied by GPs was 50 per 100 work related problems managed, significantly lower than the BEACH average of 70 per 100 problems. Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs were the most commonly recorded group, followed by compound analgesics and narcotic analgesics. Paracetamol/codeine was the most common individual medication, at a rate of 6 per 100 work related problems. Paracetamol, diclofenac sodium systemic, tramadol and ibuprofen were also among the most frequently recorded medications.

Other treatments

The rate of other treatments provided, 59 per 100 work related problems, was significantly higher than the BEACH average of 38 per 100 problems managed. Issuing a sickness certificate was the most common other treatment, recorded at a rate of 15 per 100 work related problems. This is a considerable increase from 1998–2000 when sickness certificates were provided at a rate of 2 per 100 work related problems in BEACH.

Referrals

Referrals were provided for 16 per 100 work related problems, double the average for BEACH. Referrals were made most frequently to physiotherapists (7 per 100 work related problems), orthopaedic surgeons (2 per 100) and psychologists (1 per 100).

Pathology and imaging orders

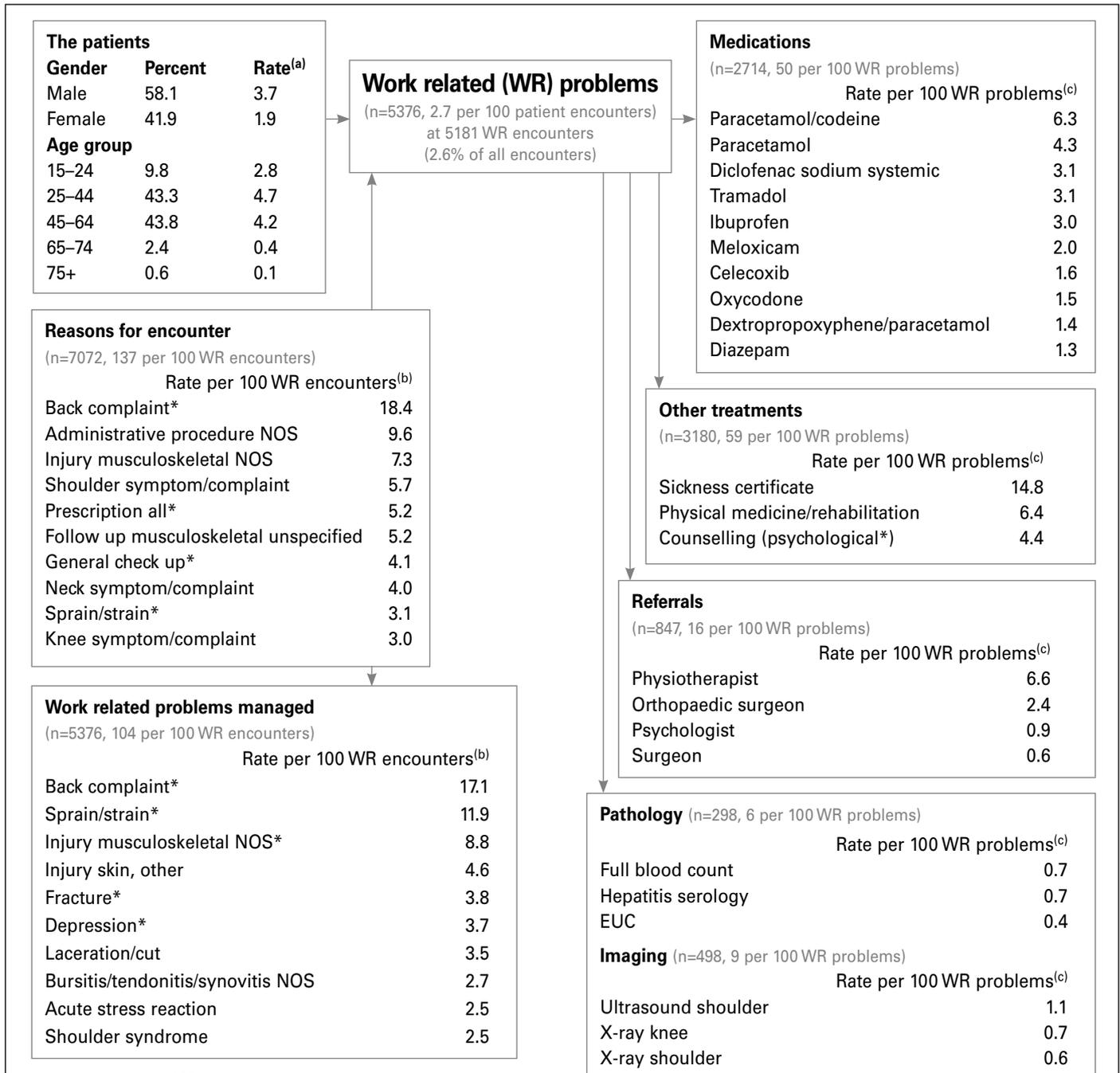
The pathology test ordering rate of 6 per 100 work related problems was much lower than the average for BEACH (25 per 100). Full blood count and hepatitis serology were the tests most commonly ordered, both at a rate of less than 1 per 100 of these problems.

The imaging order rate (9 per 100 work related problems)

was significantly higher than the BEACH average of 6 per 100 problems. The most common imaging order was for ultrasound of the shoulder (1 per 100 work related problems).

Conflict of interest: none.

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(a) Specific rate per 100 encounters in each gender and age group

(b) Expressed as a rate per 100 encounters at which at least one work related problems was managed

(c) Expressed as a rate per 100 work related problems managed

* Includes multiple ICPC-2 and ICPC-2 PLUS codes Note: NOS = not otherwise specified

Figure 1. Content of encounters at which a work related problem was managed