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Older patients

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The proportion of the Australian population aged 65 years or more increased from 12.5% in 2001¹ to 13.3% in 2009.² This aging of the population will increasingly pose challenges to the public health system. In BEACH (Bettering the Evaluation and Care of Health), between April 2001 and March 2002, and April 2008 and March 2009, the proportion of encounters accounted for by patients aged 65 years and over increased significantly from 25.1% to 29.6%.

The demographics of the older patients did not change between 2001–2002 and 2008–2009 in terms of gender, health concession card status, non-English speaking background, indigenous status or rurality. However, general practice management of these patients changed significantly. Over time, the patients brought more issues to the encounter: reasons for encounter increased from 157.2 to 165.5 per 100 encounters. The number of problems managed also increased from 166.5 to 176.9 per 100 encounters, but the proportion classed as chronic did not change (50.6% in 2001–2002 and 49.4% in 2008–2009).

As the number of problems managed at encounters with older patients increased significantly between 2001–2002 and 2008–2009, we compared general practice management in terms of the rate per 100 problems managed. Medications were reported less often in 2008–2009 (72.3 per 100 problems) than in 2001–2002 (77.7 per 100); prescribed medications decreased from 71.0 per 100 problems in 2001–2002 to 63.3 in 2008–2009, but advised over-the-counter medications and general practitioner supplied medications both increased over the period (2.4 to 2.8 and 4.4 to 6.2 per 100 problems respectively). Clinical treatment rates did not change between 2001–2002 and 2008–2009, but procedural treatments increased from 9.9 to 11.6 per 100 problems. There were also significant increases in referral rates (6.4 to 8.0 per 100 problems), particularly to allied health services (1.3 to 2.0 problems) and medical specialists (4.5 to 5.4 per 100 problems). Pathology ordering increased from 18.9 to 26.5 test/batteries per 100 problems, mostly due to a large increase in orders for chemistry pathology (11.3 to 17.5). Rates of imaging ordered increased from 4.5 to 5.2 per 100 problems managed (*Figure 1*).

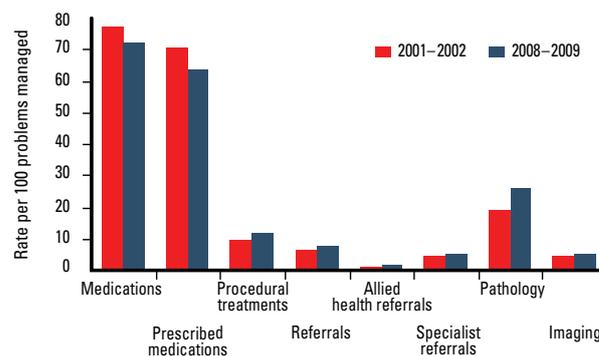


Figure 1. Problem management at encounters with patients aged 65 years and over

Between 2001–2002 and 2008–2009 increased use of procedural treatments, referrals, pathology and imaging for older patients has implications for costs and service availability as population aging continues.

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