



# Mental health in general practice

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The BEACH program, a continuous national study of general practice activity in Australia, gives us an overview of consultations involving the management of psychological problems. In a separate analysis we also examine the prescribing/provision of antidepressants. This synopsis provides a backdrop against which articles in this issue of *Australian Family Physician* can be further considered.

**A psychological problem was managed 23 482 times at the 197 000 encounters recorded in BEACH between April 2004 and March 2006, at a rate of 12 per 100 encounters. This represents an average of almost 11 000 000 encounters at which these problems were managed in general practice across Australia in each of these years. Depression was managed at a rate of 4 per 100 BEACH encounters, accounting for 2.7% of all problems managed in BEACH (Table 1). Depression made up one-third of all psychological problems managed, anxiety and sleep disturbance made up 15% and 14% respectively, while acute stress reaction and drug abuse each accounted for 5% of psychological problems managed.**

## Gender and age of patients

Female patients made up 62% of patients at encounters at which a psychological problem was managed, compared with 58.2% in total BEACH. Gender specific rates were 11.8 per 100 encounters with female patients and 10.4 per 100 encounters with male patients. The age specific rate of these encounters was highest (14.9 per 100 encounters) among patients aged 25–44 years. The lowest rate for adult patients was among those aged 65–74 years, 9.4 per 100 encounters.

## Treatment

Medications were prescribed/supplied at a rate of 66 per 100 psychological problems managed, close to the average for BEACH 2005–2006 encounters. Antidepressants accounted for almost 40% of these, being prescribed/supplied at a rate of 23.9 per 100 psychological problems managed. Anxiolytics

and hypnotics/sedatives each made up about 20% of these medications.

Clinical treatments (mostly advice or counselling) were provided more frequently for psychological problems (46.4 per 100) than average (27.0 per 100 total problems), psychological counselling being the most common (57.6% of all clinical treatments).

Referrals were provided at a rate of 9.4 per 100 psychological problems managed, significantly more often than the average rate of 7.9. This was largely due to referrals to allied health services, which were made at twice the average rate (4.6 compared with 1.9 per 100 problems managed). Patients were most commonly referred to a psychologist (46.9% of all allied health referrals), a counsellor (13.9%), or a mental health team (11.4%). Among specialist referrals, the most common were to psychiatrists (54.6%) or paediatricians (10.6% of specialist referrals).

## Antidepressant medications prescribed/supplied

Sertraline was the most commonly prescribed or supplied antidepressant, accounting for 20.3% of the 6985 antidepressants recorded during this period, followed by venlafaxine (13.2%), citalopram (10.8%), amitriptyline (8.8%), and paroxetine (7.7%).

Of the 6808 problems managed with antidepressant medication, 86% were classified as 'psychological'. Common problems for which antidepressants were prescribed/supplied are shown in Table 2. Depression accounted for 70.9% (95% CI: 69.3–72.4) of problems managed with antidepressants, followed by anxiety (6.1%) and sleep disturbance (1.9%). Nonpsychological problems managed with antidepressants made up 13.9% of the total.

## Summary of important points

- Antidepressants account for only 40% of medications prescribed/supplied by GPs for psychological problems.
- Only 71% of all antidepressants are prescribed for depression, 15% for other psychological problems, and 14% for other nonpsychological problems.

- The prescribing of antidepressants (from GPs, EHRs or the PBS) is not a valid indicator of the management of depression.

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**Table 1. Common psychological problems managed**

| Problem managed                     | Number        | Rate per 100 total BEACH encounters | Percent of total problems | National annual estimated GP encounters |
|-------------------------------------|---------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------|---|
| Depression*                         | 7823          | 4.0                                 | 2.7                       | 3 653 400                               |
| Anxiety*                            | 3502          | 1.8                                 | 1.2                       | 1 635 500                               |
| Sleep disturbance                   | 3259          | 1.7                                 | 1.1                       | 1 522 000                               |
| Acute stress reaction               | 1174          | 0.6                                 | 0.4                       | 548 300                                 |
| Drug abuse                          | 1136          | 0.6                                 | 0.4                       | 530 500                                 |
| Dementia                            | 1024          | 0.5                                 | 0.4                       | 478 200                                 |
| Schizophrenia                       | 1000          | 0.5                                 | 0.3                       | 467 000                                 |
| Tobacco abuse                       | 728           | 0.4                                 | 0.3                       | 340 000                                 |
| Chronic alcohol abuse               | 534           | 0.3                                 | 0.2                       | 249 400                                 |
| Affective psychosis                 | 394           | 0.2                                 | 0.1                       | 184 000                                 |
| Post-traumatic stress disorder      | 246           | 0.1                                 | 0.1                       | 114 900                                 |
| Hyperkinetic disorder               | 236           | 0.1                                 | 0.1                       | 110 200                                 |
| Acute alcohol abuse                 | 226           | 0.1                                 | 0.1                       | 105 500                                 |
| Other psychological problems        | 2200          | 1.1                                 | 0.7                       | 1027 000                                |
| <b>Total psychological problems</b> | <b>23 482</b> | <b>11.9</b>                         | <b>8.0</b>                | <b>10 965 800</b>                       |

Note: National estimates are a simple extrapolation to the 92 million GP patient encounters classed as A1 and A2 items of service through Medicare annually over this study period

\* Includes multiple ICPC-2 or ICPC-2 PLUS codes

**Table 2. Common problems for which an antidepressant was prescribed/supplied**

| Problem managed                                 | Number      | Percent of antidepressant problems <sup>(a)</sup> (n=6808) | Percent of problem <sup>(b)</sup> |
|---|-------------|--|-----------------------------------|
| <b>Depression*</b>                              | 4824        | 70.9   | 61.7                              |
| <b>Other psychological</b>                      | 1039        | 15.3   | —                                 |
| Anxiety*  | 416         | 6.1  | 11.9                              |
| Sleep disturbance                               | 127         | 1.9  | 3.9                               |
| Post-traumatic stress disorder                  | 64          | 0.9  | 26.0                              |
| Affective psychosis*                            | 62          | 0.9  | 15.7                              |
| Phobia, compulsive disorder                     | 53          | 0.8  | 36.1                              |
| Acute stress reaction                           | 52          | 0.8  | 4.4                               |
| Schizophrenia                                   | 47          | 0.7  | 4.7                               |
| <b>Nonpsychological</b>                         | 945         | 13.9   | —                                 |
| Prescription (all)* <sup>(c)</sup>              | 352         | 5.2  | 8.3                               |
| Back complaint*                                 | 72          | 1.0  | 1.2                               |
| Pain, muscle/general/herpes zoster*             | 72          | 1.0  | 4.4                               |
| Migraine/headache/tension headache*             | 60          | 0.9  | 2.5                               |
| Urinary incontinence/frequency/bladder symptom* | 48          | 0.7  | 7.0                               |
| Arthritis (all)*                                | 28          | 0.4  | 0.4                               |
| Subtotal most common problems                   | 6277        | 92.2   | —                                 |
| <b>Total problems</b>                           | <b>6808</b> | <b>100.0</b>   |                                   |

(a) Percent of all problems for which an antidepressant was prescribed/supplied by the GP

(b) Proportion of total contacts with this problem for which an antidepressant was prescribed/supplied

(c) Based on the overall 70/30% split of antidepressants for depression/other problems, 70% of these may be for depression

\* Includes multiple ICPC-2 or ICPC-2 PLUS codes