



Presentations of 'itch' in Australian general practice

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The BEACH program, a continuous national study of general practice activity in Australia gives us an overview of the consultations in general practice involving patient presentations of 'itch'. This provides a backdrop against which the theme articles in this issue of *Australian Family Physician* can be further considered.

Figure 1 summarises patient encounters with 'itch' as a reason for encounter (RFE). This does not include itches that were specifically stated to be perianal, urogenital, or associated with the eye or the ear.

Rate of presentation

Between April 1998 and March 2003, there were 2871 encounters recorded in BEACH in which patients described itch as one of their RFEs (0.6 per 100 encounters). This represents 600 000 occasions per year in Australian general practice where the patient explicitly described itch as a reason for the encounter.

Patients

There was a small but steady increase in the age specific rate of presentation from 0.5% of encounters with children aged <15 years to 0.7% of encounters with patients aged >75 years.

Problems managed - 'itch' RFE

Of the 5122 problems managed at these 'itch encounters', 2642 (51.6%) were clearly associated with the RFE of itch. The most common diagnosis was contact/allergic dermatitis (31.0%). At 14% of encounters the itch remained undiagnosed, being simply

described by the GP as pruritus (12.0%) or rash (2.0%). Other relatively common diagnoses were urticaria (8.0%), dermatophytosis (6.0%), seborrhoeic dermatitis (6.0%), allergy/allergic reaction (4.7%), and adverse effect of a medical agent (2.0%).

Management of 'itch' RFE

For these itch related problems, medications were provided (prescribed, supplied or advised for over-the-counter purchase) at a rate of 108 per 100 problems managed. The top 14 medications accounted for 80% of all medications; the most popular being topical corticosteroids. Systemic antihistamines, topical antiparasitic, and several antifungals also emerged in the most common medications.

Nonpharmacological treatments were provided at a relatively low rate; clinical treatments being recorded at a rate of 23 per 100 (usually provision of health education and advice). Therapeutic procedures were relatively rare (3.2 per 100), the majority being excision/removal of tissue/biopsy.

Pathology tests were ordered at a relatively low rate of 10.6 per 100 of itch related problems. There was almost a total absence of imaging test orders for these problems and only 4.5% were referred elsewhere (mostly to a dermatologist).

Acknowledgment

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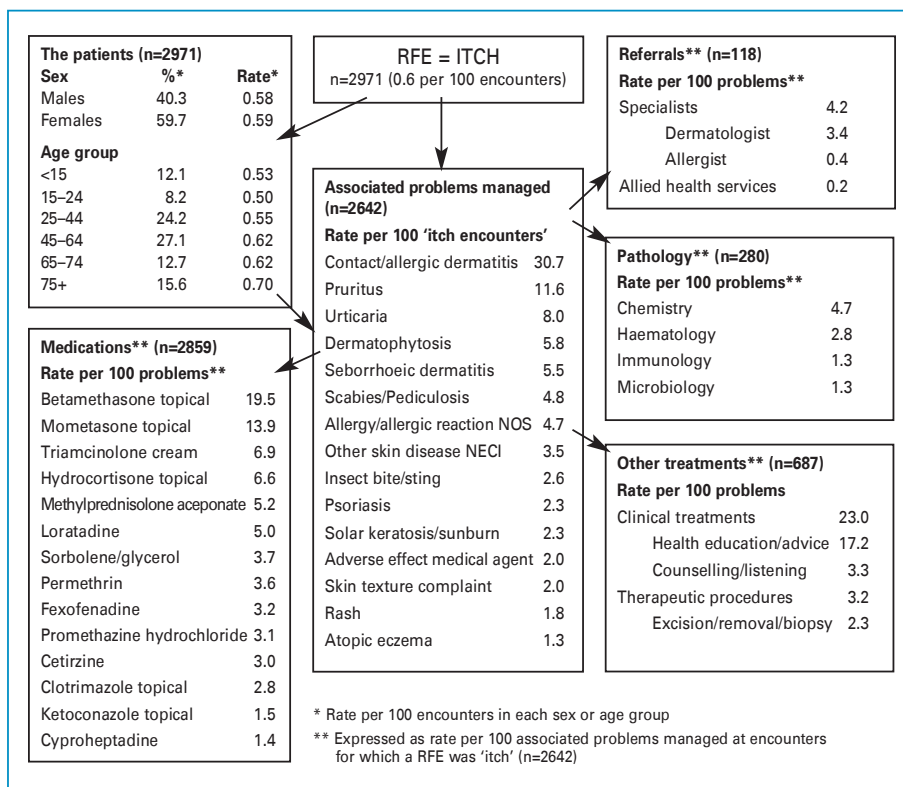


Figure 1. Content of encounters at which 'itch' was a RFE

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