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Ageing Australia spurs chronic diseases and rising demand for GP services: new findings from the BEACH research program

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[Editors – see links to reports at the end of media release; infographic and Feature Chapter attached](#)

Two new research reports by the BEACH research program of the [University of Sydney's Family Medicine Research Centre](#) reveal an increasing load on GP-delivered services as general practitioners respond to the twin challenges of an ageing population and an increasing prevalence of chronic diseases.

Amid the [ongoing freeze to Medicare payments for GP services](#), the reports show GPs are working harder. In 2015–16, Australian GPs managed 154 problems per 100 patient encounters, significantly more than a decade earlier (149 per 100 patient encounters). The reports also reveal that GPs managed 67 million more problems at patient encounters in 2015–16 than they did in 2006–07.

Compared to 2006-07, GPs provided:

- 31 million more prescriptions
- 25 million more clinical treatments (e.g. advice and counselling)
- 10 million more procedures
- 5 million more referrals to medical specialists
- 5 million more to allied health services
- 24 million more pathology tests/test battery orders
- 6 million more imaging tests

[The Federal Government's Health Care Homes initiative](#) proposes targeting people with two or more diagnosed chronic conditions to improve the coordination of health care. To date, most discussion has centred on the care of older people aged 65 plus with complex chronic health issues. However, the new BEACH reports suggest a need to focus on middle-aged Australians as well. In 2015-16, middle-aged people aged 45-64 years had many more tests, referral, medications and GP encounters than the average person. Specifically, they had:

- 9 per cent more encounters with GPs
- 14 per cent more clinical face-to-face time with GPs
- 16 per cent more problems managed
- 16 per cent more medications
- 31 per cent more tests ordered
- 20 per cent more referrals

“The reports indicate that the 1.2 million middle-age Australians aged 45 to 64 who have three or more chronic conditions could benefit from the government’s proposed ‘Health Care Home’ environment,” said Professor Helena Britt, lead investigator of the two reports.

The reports reveal that 60 per cent of middle-age Australians (about 3.5 million) have at least one diagnosed chronic condition, 37 per cent have two (about 2.2 million), and one-in-five (about 1.2 million) have three or more chronic conditions.

A comparison of middle-aged (45-64 years) and older Australians (65 years plus) reveals 300,000 more middle aged people (3.54 million) have one or more diagnosed chronic conditions compared to older people (3.24 million).

The most common 'pair' of diagnosed chronic conditions in the 45–64 age-group are hypertension and hyperlipidaemia – one in 10 surveyed patients and one in 15 in the population having both. The most common combination of three diseases was hypertension, hyperlipidaemia and osteoarthritis.

“Given the focus of the federal government’s [‘45–49 health check’ program](#) on preventing or delaying the onset of chronic disease, it is highly possible that some chronic conditions were diagnosed as a result of these checks,” Professor Britt said.

Since people with diagnosed chronic conditions visit healthcare providers more often than an average person, the findings have implications for future rates of consultation to GPs, specialists and allied health professionals – and associated costs to Medicare. However, this extra spending should improve patients’ overall health and potentially reduce avoidable hospitalisations, which incur much bigger costs than the extra care provided in general practice.

The reports also show that people in the 45–64 year age-group have high rates of risk behaviours: in 2015–16, more than 70 per cent of these people were either overweight or obese, with the proportion that were morbidly obese more than doubling, from 3 per cent to 6 per cent over the study period. Further, over the past 16 years (2000–01 to 2015–16), there has been a steady increase in people moving ‘up the obesity scale’.

“While prevalence of daily smoking and hazardous alcohol consumption fell significantly among all adult patients, there was no change in smoking and alcohol use in the 45–64 year age group. Around one in five middle-aged people aged 45-64 remain daily smokers and one in four drink alcohol at hazardous levels,” Professor Britt said. “These results do not bode well for the future health of this age group of patients visiting GPs.

“We need more research to understand why clinical and public health programs haven’t affected their lifestyle choices,” she said. “Perhaps enrolment in health care homes and some targeted lifestyle programs could assist 45–64 year olds in the management of their chronic disease load.”

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Reports

General practice activity in Australia 2015–16. General practice series no. 40. Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2016 <https://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/handle/2123/15514>

A decade of Australian general practice activity 2006–07 to 2015–16. General practice series no. 41. Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2016 <https://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/handle/2123/15482>