

SAND abstract No. 32 from the BEACH program 2001–02

Subject: Patient use of after-hours medical services

Organisation supporting this study: Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing.

Issues: This sub-study investigated the proportion of general practice patients who received any after hours medical service in the previous twelve months. The study further examined what facility/service provider was used; how many times each facility/service provider was used; how many times payment was required, and how much the patient was required to pay prior to any subsequent Medicare claim.

Sample: 2,544 respondents from 88 GPs; data collected between 30/10/2001–3/12/2001.

Method: Detailed in the paper entitled 'SAND Method' on this website (<http://www.fmrc.org.au/beach.htm>).

Summary of results

The age-sex distribution of respondents was similar to the distribution for all BEACH (general practice) encounters, with the majority (59.3%) of patients being female.

Of the 2,544 respondents, 595 (23.4%, 95% CI: 20.2–26.5) had received after hours medical services in the past 12 months. These services included attendance at an emergency department (public or private), a GP visit from the patient's usual practice, a deputising service, a co-operative service, or a service from a GP where the patient was uncertain of the service provider. Attendance at after hours services was most common among patients aged 1–4 years (46.4%), and least common in children aged less than 1 year (18.0%).

Of the 595 patients who had received after hours medical services during the past 12 months, 590 indicated one or more service types used. More than half (59.7%) had attended a public emergency department, 9.0% a private emergency department, 16.4% a GP from their current practice, 14.2% a deputising service, 6.6% a co-operative service, and 6.6% a service from an unspecified GP (multiple response was allowed).

These 590 patients reported after hours service attendance on 664 occasions. For 624 of these visits, the patient recorded the frequency with which they had been asked to pay for each service type or how much they had been asked to pay usually. Of these 624 patient-service type combinations, 95 (15.2%) were usually charged more than \$30 and 25 (4.0%) were charged \$1–30. Altogether, 121 patients (19.4%) had been asked to pay for after hours services on at least one occasion. None of those who attended a public emergency department was asked to pay for after hours services.

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