

SAND abstract No. 52 from the BEACH program 2002–03

Subject: Language and cultural background of patients

Organisation supporting this study: Department of Health and Ageing.

Issues: Previous research suggests that health surveys are inclined to under-enumerate persons from culturally diverse and in particular, Indigenous backgrounds. This study aimed to validate the routine BEACH questions on language background and Indigenous status, using more extensive questions that focussed on the patient's cultural background.

Method: Detailed in the paper entitled 'SAND Method: 2002-03' on the FMRC website (http://www.fmrc.org.au/publications/SAND_abstracts.htm).

Based on the 2001 Census questions, patients were asked about their country of birth, parents' countries of birth, whether the patient was of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin and what language was spoken at home.

Final Sample: 294 GPs and 8,943 patients surveyed between 03/12/02 and 05/05/03.

Summary of results

Sixty-one percent of respondents were female (95% CI: 59.0-62.7) compared with BEACH (57.4%, 95% CI: 57.0-58.6%).

Two hundred and four (2.4%, 95% CI: 1.3-3.4) respondents identified as of either Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin, twice the rate routinely recorded in BEACH (April 01-March 03 unweighted, 1.2%, 95% CI: 0.8-1.6). Although not statistically significant this increased identification rate provides some evidence that the structured question may be more successful in identifying Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents in general practice.

Seventeen per cent of respondents reported speaking a language other than English at home (95% CI: 14.5-19.6), more than twice the rate routinely identified in BEACH (7.5%, 95% CI: 6.5-8.5). However, the SAND question is broader and includes those who speak mainly English plus another language, while the routine BEACH question only includes those who mainly speak a language other than English. Languages were classified according to the Australian Classification of Languages 1997 (ABS). After English, Southern European languages (Italian, Greek, French, Spanish etc) was the most common group of languages, spoken by 5.5% of respondents.

Three quarters of respondents (75.3%) were born in Australia and two out of five respondents (41%) had at least one parent born overseas.

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