

SAND abstract No. 65 from the BEACH program 2003–04

Subject: Language and cultural background of general practice patients

Organisation supporting this study: Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing and General Practice Statistics and Classification Unit.

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 language and cultural background.

Sample: 311 GPs and 9245 patients surveyed between 20/01/2004 and 03/05/2004.

Method: Detailed in the paper entitled 'SAND Method 2003–04' on this 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. Languages were classified according to the Australian Classification of Languages 1997 (ABS).

Summary of results

Fifty eight percent of respondents were female which is comparable with the total BEACH sample. There was a somewhat greater proportion of patients aged 65 years and over in the SAND sample (28.5%) compared with the BEACH sample (23.0%).

Two hundred and forty one (2.6%, 95% CI: 1.5-3.7) respondents identified as of either Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin. In the sixth year of BEACH, GPs who did not participate in the cultural and language SAND study asked patients the routine BEACH question on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin and recorded encounters with Indigenous patients at 2.1% (95% CI: 1.3–2.8, unweighted) of their encounters. This routine BEACH rate was substantially higher than recorded in previous BEACH years where the sample rate of Indigenous encounters was around 1.0% (unweighted).

Nearly 16% of respondents reported speaking a language other than English at home (15.8%, 95% CI: 13.6–17.9), 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 whose main language is NOT English. After English, Southern European languages (Italian, Greek, French, Spanish etc) was the most common group of languages, spoken by 6.5% of respondents.

More than three quarters of respondents (77.1%) were born in Australia and two out of five respondents (39.5%) had at least one parent born overseas.

Correspondence to: Stephanie Knox, GPSCU