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Follow up: clinical hours worked by age-sex of GP
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In the most recent Byte from BEACH(1) we demonstrated that GPs aged less than 35 years report working significantly fewer clinical hours than GPs aged 45–54, 55-64 and 65–74 years, and about the same number as those aged 75 years and over.

A number of readers asked if this was because there are more women in the under 35 GP age group, and whether these young women work fewer hours than the young men.

In this Byte we present average direct patient care hours worked by age and sex of GP.

We again use data from the BEACH program(2) January 2009–December 2011, during which 2948 GPs participated in the program.

In the BEACH ‘GP Profile’ questionnaire we ask each participating GP their age, sex and:

‘How many direct patient care hours do you work per week? (include hours of direct patient care, instructions, counselling etc, and other services such as referrals, prescriptions phone calls etc).’

Results

Of the 2,948 GPs participants, 2,890 (98.0%) responded to all three questions. Figure 1 shows their age-sex distribution. The first thing that stands out is that GPs aged 55 years or older made up 39% of the sample, and almost 80% of these GPs were male.
The changing sex-distribution of the profession over time is apparent, with increased number of women entering general practice in more recent years:

- in the three older age groups male GPs far outnumbered females
- in the 35–44 and 45–54 year age groups, the gender split was close to 50/50
- in the under 35 year age group, females outnumbered males.

This age-gender distribution probably reflects changes in social norms (which started in the 1960s) for women’s education and their work involvement after marriage, and broadening of access to university education in the post-Whitlam era.

Figure 2 gives the average number of direct patient care hours per week as reported by GPs in each age-sex group.

Females worked significantly fewer direct patient care hours than their male counterparts in all age groups except the 75+ years, where there were so few females the very wide 95% confidence interval rendered the difference not statistically significant.

Male GPs aged less than 35 years reported working 38.2 hours per week on average, and the number of hours increased with age, to peak at 43.2 and 43.1 hours in those aged 45–54 yrs and 55-64 years respectively. Average patient care hours then significantly decreased to 38.2 hours for 65-74 years old male GPs, and 33.8 hours for the oldest age group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age-sex of GP</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;35 yrs</td>
<td>38.2</td>
<td>30.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-44 yrs</td>
<td>41.3</td>
<td>28.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-54 yrs</td>
<td>43.2</td>
<td>32.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55-64 yrs</td>
<td>43.1</td>
<td>34.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65-74 yrs</td>
<td>38.2</td>
<td>32.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75+ yrs</td>
<td>33.8</td>
<td>28.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The work pattern of female GPs differed. The youngest age group (<35 years) reported an average 30.9 hours per week, but the fewest number of clinical hours worked was reported by the 35-44 year old women (28.0 hours). The number of hours then increased to peak at 34.8 hours per week among 55-64 year old women. While in the two oldest age groups there was some decrease in hours worked by female GPs, the smaller numbers in these age groups rendered the changes not significant.

This study has limitations. The GPs included in this analysis were recruited to BEACH from random samples of GPs who had claimed at least 375 general practice Medicare items in the most recent 3 month Medicare data quarter. Therefore GPs working very part time (e.g. 1 day per week) or doing irregular locum work, were not in the sample frame from which the BEACH sample are drawn.

Conclusion

We can conclude from this study that young GPs of both sexes work fewer direct patient care hours than GPs aged between 45 and 64 years, but that women in this younger age groups work significantly fewer hours than their male counterparts. So, the fact that Gen Y GPs (as a whole) work significantly fewer hours than middle-aged GPs is evident in both sexes, but the high proportion of women in the Gen Y GPs influences the average in this age group more than in others.

These findings have implications for the future GP workforce, particularly as consultations with female GPs are significantly longer (in minutes, measured by recoded finish time minus start time) on average, than their male counterparts, so they would see fewer patients per hour than male GPs.

Suggested citation


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References