



**NATIONAL
PRACTICE
NURSE
WORKFORCE
SURVEY
2003**

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1. Introduction

Australian Divisions of General Practice Ltd. (ADGP) is the peak national body representing 120 Divisions of General Practice across Australia, and was established in 1998. The first local Divisions were established in 1992. About 94 per cent of GPs are members of a local Division of General Practice. ADGP has been contracted by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing to build the capacity of Divisions of General Practice to support nursing in general practice and to provide input into policy directions. This work is directed by the Principal Policy Advisor for Nursing in General Practice.

In late 2003 ADGP elected to undertake a national survey of practice nurses with the assistance of the 120 Divisions of General Practice. The reason for the survey was to collect National and State/Territory data on the current nursing in general practice workforce. Prior to this survey being undertaken there was no comprehensive national data available on the practice nursing workforce as a specific branch of the nursing profession.

Nurses in Australia have been employed by many general practices for a number of decades. However since the Federal Budget initiative announced in May 2001 and more recently the initiatives in *MedicarePlus*, encouraging more general practices to employ nurses, there has been a markedly increased focus on the valuable and diverse roles that nurses can play in supporting general practitioners in the provision of primary care services. This interest has also been evident from within the nursing profession with a greater emphasis on the role and support requirements of nurses working in general practice.

2. Method

A simple survey instrument and administration guidelines were developed by ADGP and forwarded to all Divisions of General Practice. ADGP relied on the Divisions to circulate the survey to all the general practices in their region and to collect and return completed surveys to ADGP. The Divisions were given the option of administering the survey in the manner that they believed would be most appropriate for their general practices and would elicit the most accurate results. Methods of distribution utilised by the Divisions included fax out, hand delivery and telephone interviews.

The survey instrument consisted of a Division Cover Sheet, a Practice Survey and an Individual Nurse Survey for each nurse employed in the practice. A copy of the Survey instrument can be found in Appendix One.

3. Limitations

The survey instrument was developed as a simple tool intended to provide a quick snapshot of the practice nurse workforce. It was not intended to provide data on which to conduct an in-depth analysis of the workforce. Questions on the roles of practice nurses did not form part of this study. This information is available from other recently completed work such as *General Practice Nursing in Australia**

(*This study was funded by the Australian Government and undertaken by the Royal College of Nursing Australia and the Royal College of General Practitioners).

4. Acknowledgements

The survey instrument and survey report were prepared by Julie Porritt Principal Advisor for Nursing in General Practice ADGP.

ADGP would like to acknowledge the assistance of the State Based Organisations of Divisions of General Practice for their assistance in circulating the survey instrument to their member Divisions and for promoting the survey to Divisions.

Particular thanks are extended to the Divisions of General Practice for their assistance in administering the survey; and to the many general practice staff and practice nurses who took the time to respond.

5. Nursing in General Practice Survey Response Rate

70% (84) of the 120 Divisions of General Practice responded to the survey. The response rate for Divisions was 100% in Tasmania (3) and the Australian Capital Territory (1), 80% in Victoria (24), 79% in Western Australia (11), 68% in Queensland (13), 62% in New South Wales (23), 57% in South Australia(8) and 50% in the Northern Territory (1).

The responding Divisions represent 53% (*5,091) of general practices across Australia (*ABS figures indicate that there were 9,600 general practices in Australia in 2001-02). Of these practices 60% (3,055) do not employ a practice nurse. Of the 40% (2,036) of practices that do employ at least one practice nurse, the response rate was 73% (1,485).

6. Main Findings

6.1. Practice Data

1,485 practices responded to the survey and between them these practices employ 2349 practice nurses (Figure I). Over 40% (560) of these practices employ only one nurse; however there are practices that employ many nurses (Figure 3).

6.2. Practice Nurse Data

Detailed individual surveys were completed by 1,968 practice nurses

The majority of practice nurses are registered nurses (84%) with the remainder of the general practice nursing workforce consisting of enrolled nurses (16%).

The following excerpt is from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's *Nursing Labour Force 2002* report:

'Nurses are classified into two broad categories: registered nurses, who make up the majority of all nurses, and enrolled nurses. The minimum educational requirement for a registered nurse is a 3-year degree from a tertiary institution or the equivalent from a recognised hospital-based program. The minimum educational requirement for an enrolled nurse is a 1-year diploma from a vocational educational and training institution (VET) or equivalent from a recognised hospital-based program. Although the level of expertise varies within these groups, in general registered nurses perform more complex medical procedures and hold more responsibility than do enrolled nurses'. Enrolled nurses are required to be supervised and directed by a registered nurse.

There are very few male nurses employed in general practice making up less than 2% of the total nursing workforce.

Consistent with Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's *Nursing Labour Force 2002* report (of the national nursing profession), practice nurses are an ageing workforce. There are few younger nurses entering the profession, with 73% of the current practice nurse workforce over the age of 40 years (Figure 4).

The length of service for nurses employed in the general practice setting portrays an interesting picture, with almost one third of practice nurses having been employed in general practice for less than two years (Figure 5). This data is perhaps reflective of a number of factors. We know that nurses have been employed in some general practices for a number of decades. However over the past two years there have been several factors which have impacted on general practice nursing:

- The 2001-2002 Federal Budget practice nurse initiative "*Future Directions in Practice Nursing*", which provided funding for rural practices to assist with employment of a practice nurse.

- The establishment of practice nurse support programs by the Divisions of General Practice. These programs have provided the nurses with opportunities for networking and support and increased access to ongoing education and training. The programs have also supported general practice in the recruitment and employment of nurses.
- An increased focus on practice nursing in this country over the past two years which has highlighted the valuable role that nurses can play in supporting the general practitioner in the provision of health services to patients.

Over three quarters of the practice nurse workforce are part time workers, many of whom are employed in more than one nursing job (Table 5).

7. Overview

7.1. Practice data

7.1.1. Number of General Practices

A total of 1,485 general practices responded to the survey. The following chart displays the total number of practices per state that completed a survey.

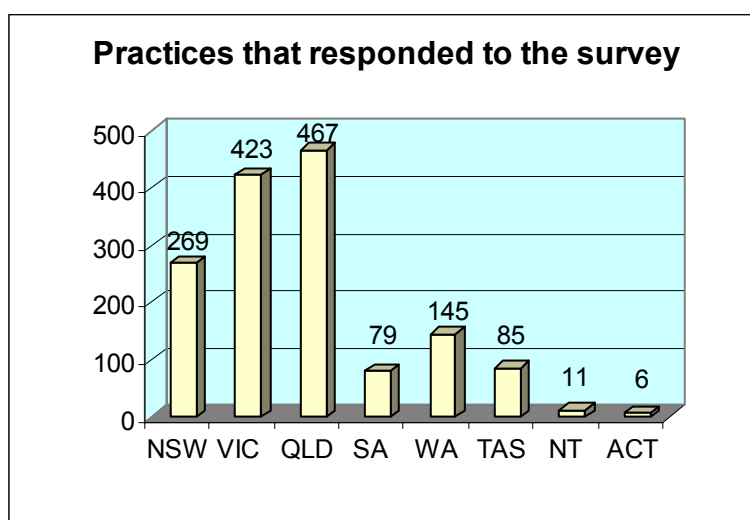


Figure 1: Total Number of Practices that participated in the survey by state

7.1.2. Number of Practice Nurses

Practices were asked to report the total number of nurses employed at the practice (headcount). These figures include both registered and enrolled nurses. There are a total of 2,349 practice nurses employed across the 1,485 practices that participated in the survey. Of these nurses 87% work part time at the practice, and 13% work full time at the practice.

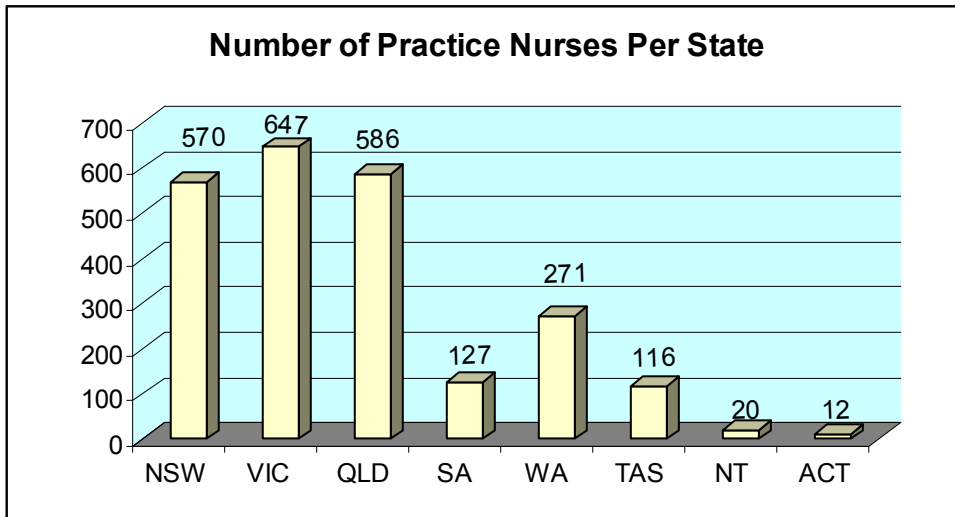


Figure 2: Total Number of Practice Nurses Per State

Over 40% of practices employ only one nurse, however some practices employ a number of nurses (Figure 3).

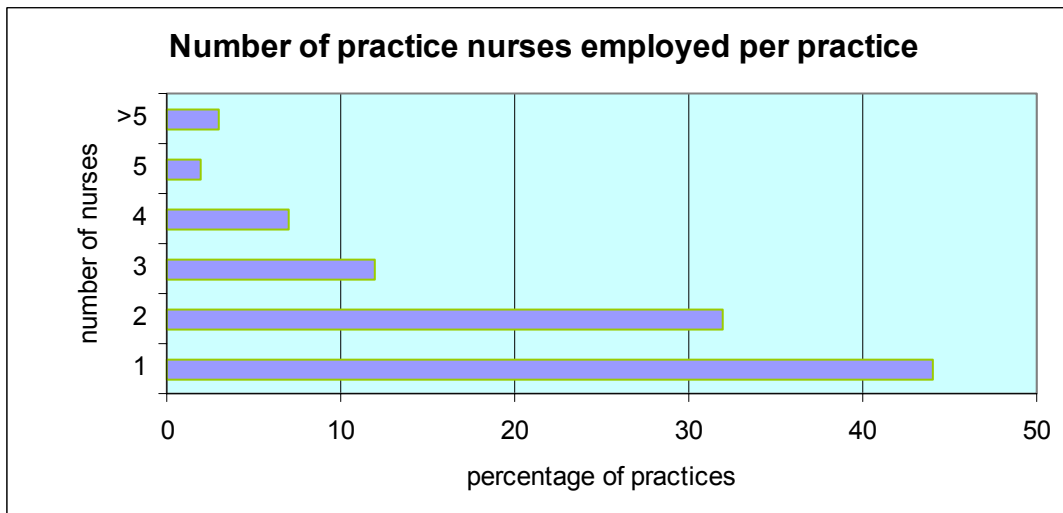


Figure 3: The number of practice nurses employed per general practice

7.1.3. Other Nursing Services

Some practices receive nursing services on a contract or sessional basis from another organisation. This may be in addition to employing their own nurse or may be a substitution for employing a nurse for the practice.

In this study only practices that actually employ a practice nurse responded to the survey. 528 of these practices also receive nursing services on a contract or sessional basis in addition to the employed practice nurse hours.

Overall the most common source for practices obtaining additional nursing services was from a Division of General Practice, although there was some state by state variation.

Table 1: Number of Practices Obtaining Contract or Sessional Nursing Services

Employing organisation of the nurse.	NSW	VIC	QLD	SA	WA	TAS	NT	ACT	Australia
Division of General Practice	28	22	3	5	12	2	0	1	73
Area Health Service	3	15	2	4	2	0	0	0	26
Private Contractor	2	18	2	1	2	1	1	0	27
Other	10	8	6	1	5	5	0	1	36
Not specified	3	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	4
TOTAL NUMBER OF PRACTICES	46	63	14	11	21	8	1	2	166

Table 2: Total Number of Contract or Sessional Nursing Hours Per Week in General practice

Employing organisation of the nurse	NSW	VIC	QLD	SA	WA	TAS	NT	ACT	Australia
Division of General Practice	99	39	3	30	28	0	0	0	199
Area Health Service	3	38	4	16	4	0	0	0	65
Private Contractor	0	44	3	0	6	0	0	0	53
Other	13	117	14	0	20	0	0	0	164
Not specified	10	14	0	0	10	0	0	0	34
TOTAL HOURS PER WEEK	125	252	24	46	68	0*	0*	0*	515

*not reported

7.2. Practice Nurse Data

7.2.1. Total Practice Nurse Numbers

Practice nurses were asked to complete individual survey responses. The following table indicates the total number of responses received per state from registered and enrolled practice nurses. The overall response rate from individual practice nurses, from practices that participated in the survey, was 84%.

Table 3: Number of Nurses that completed an individual practice nurse survey

	NSW	VIC	QLD	SA	WA	TAS	NT	ACT	Australia
Registered Nurses	443	431	437	70	156	81	15	11	1,644
Enrolled Nurses	50	93	70	28	50	28	4	1	324
TOTAL	493	524	507	98	206	109	19	12	1,968
Percentage of individual nurse responses from participating practices	86%	81%	87%	77%	76%	94%	95%	100%	

7.2.2. Demographics

Age

Consistent with the nursing profession as a whole, practice nurses are an ageing workforce. There are few younger nurses entering the profession, with 73% of the current practice nurse workforce over the age of 40 years

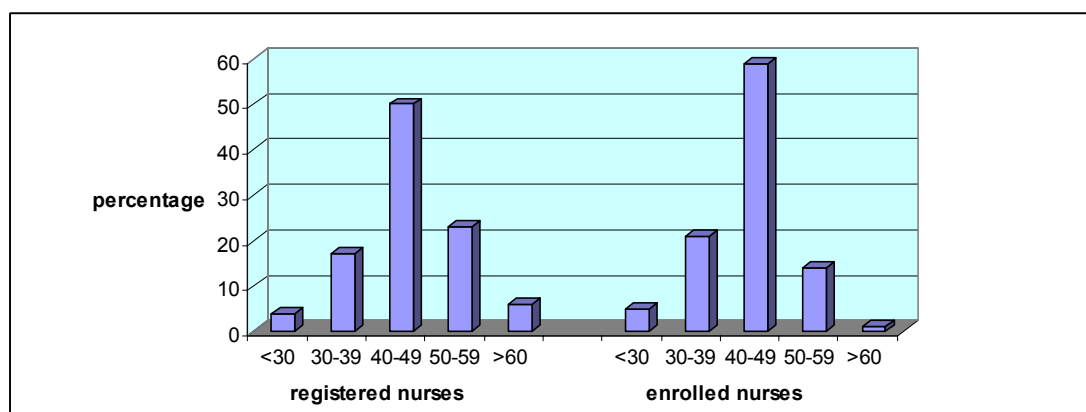


Figure 4: Age distribution of practice nurses

Sex

There are very few male nurses employed in general practice making up less than 2% of the total nursing workforce. This is below the national percentage of 6%.

7.2.3. Hours Worked

The practice nursing workforce is predominantly a part time workforce, with 84% (1,976) of the workforce employed on a part-time basis.

Table 4: Proportion of practice nurses working part-time and full-time

	NSW	VIC	QLD	SA	WA	TAS	NT	ACT	Australia
% part time	85.0	82.0	83.0	74.0	90.0	85.0	*	*	84.0
% fulltime	15.0	18.0	17.0	26.0	10.0	15.0	*	*	16.0

* Insufficient data

7.2.4. Length of Service of Nurses in General Practice

The length of service for nurses employed in the general practice setting portrays an interesting picture, with almost one third of nurses having been employed in general practice for less than two years.

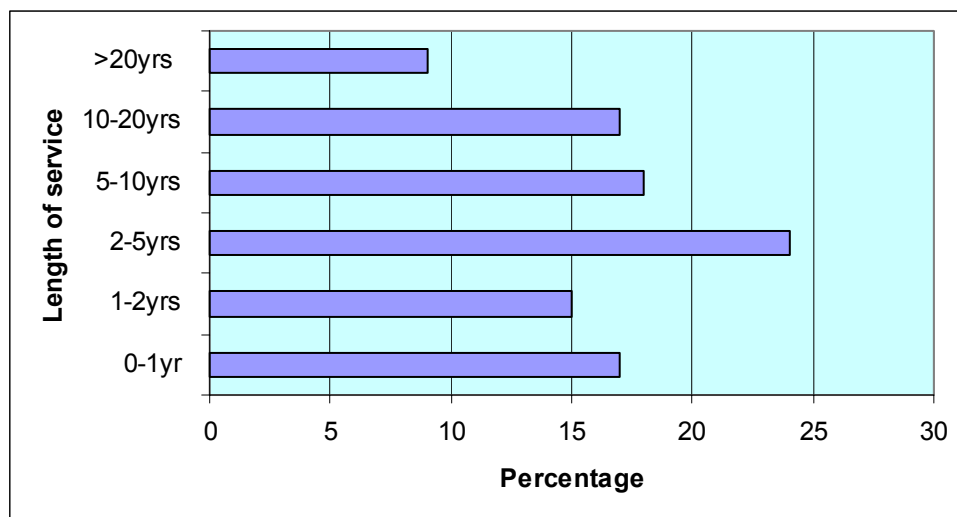


Figure 5: Length of service for nurses working in general practice

7.2.5. Patterns of Employment

Almost one third of the practice nursing workforce is employed in another nursing job. This may be due to the largely part-time nature of many of the positions available in general practice.

Table 5: Number of Practice Nurses employed in another nursing position.

	NSW	VIC	QLD	SA	WA	TAS	NT	ACT	Australia
Public Hospital	56	80	47	13	32	15	1	0	244
Another General Practice	20	29	32	5	12	4	1	1	104
Private Hospital	24	31	23	1	8	7	1	1	96
Aged Care Facility	12	29	29	1	7	2	0	0	80
Other	33	55	41	16	18	8	1	0	172
TOTAL	145	224	163	36	77	36	4	2	696

7.2.6. Membership of a Professional Nursing Organisation

Forty three percent of practice nurses reported that they were members of a professional nursing organisation. The most frequently reported membership was to the Australian Nursing Federation.

Table 6: Number of Reported Memberships to Nursing Professional Organisations

Professional Nursing Organisation	Number of Reported Memberships
Australian Nursing Federation	641
Australian Practice Nurses Association	89
Royal College of Nursing Australia	51
Other Nursing Organisation	262

7.2.7. Post Graduate Qualifications in Nursing

Forty six percent of practice nurses reported that they held an additional post graduate nursing qualification. The most frequently reported qualifications were: midwifery (19%), accredited nurse immuniser (9%), and asthma educator (3%).

8. The Future

ADGP believes that the information produced from this survey has provided some insightful information on the makeup of the practice nursing workforce which has not previously been available. We believe that the information will be of value to Federal and State Governments, nursing organisations and Divisions of General Practice to assist in workforce planning decisions for the current and future practice nursing workforce needs.

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