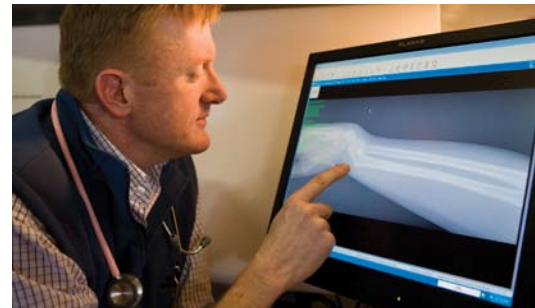


GP PROCEDURALISTS: The hidden heart of rural and regional health in Australia



FURTHER INFORMATION

Please contact Bogong Regional Training Network if you would like to receive the full report, "GP proceduralists: the hidden heart of rural and regional health in Australia".

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Bogong Regional Training Network (www.bogong.org.au) is one of twenty regional training providers funded by the Australian Government to deliver postgraduate vocational training for medical graduates who want to pursue a career in General Practice in Australia.

The Bogong region incorporates areas serviced by the Border, North East Victorian and Goulburn Valley Divisions of General Practice. It includes 36 general practice based training sites, four regional hospitals and several small district hospitals.



WHY WE CONDUCTED THIS RESEARCH

Attracting, skilling and retaining proceduralist GPs is an important part of health care in rural communities. Succession planning is also a critical issue, with a large cohort of GPs and GP proceduralists approaching retirement.

In 2008 Bogong commissioned a needs analysis of GP procedural medicine to ascertain the current and likely future demographic trends and status of procedural practice in our region. Through this research we wanted to:

- take stock of the extent, type and frequency of procedural medicine being undertaken in our region, particularly in the areas of anaesthetics, obstetrics and surgery, and
- estimate the likely demand for and supply of the GP proceduralist workforce in the future.

The study included electronic surveys, focus groups and structured interviews of General Practitioner Proceduralists (GPPs), representatives from the Department of Human Services (Victoria) and Hospital CEOs.

MAIN FINDINGS

The final report, "GP proceduralists: the hidden heart of rural and regional health in Australia", covered the following points:

- **REVEALING THE HIDDEN HEART:**

GP proceduralists will remain hidden in the system for as long as they are not recognised and counted as a distinct cohort of valued and highly trained medical practitioners. Recommendation 1 suggests that GP proceduralists should be counted as part of the Australian Institute of Health & Welfare (AIHW) Medical Labour Force survey.

- **PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE:** The health system is fragmented and there is a significant lack of cohesion, as well as differing levels of trust, between various stakeholders. Individuals and groups have different needs, perspectives and pressures that influence how they operate in the environment. Recommendation 2 suggests the need for a 'summit' of interested parties to explore the landscape of GP procedural practice with a view to developing stronger relationships.

- **ATTRACTING GPs AND GP PROCEDURALISTS:** There are many interconnected elements associated with ensuring a viable and robust GP procedural workforce. Several recommendations offer suggestions to promote GP procedural practice and address some of the barriers to embarking upon or remaining in GP procedural practice.

- **TRAINING GPs AND GP PROCEDURALISTS:** The shortage of GP proceduralists in the Bogong region is likely to escalate in the next five years as GPs and GP proceduralists retire and a new generation of

doctors reduce the number of hours they work per week. Expanding the training effort to replace the current supply is an essential element of the workforce strategy, as is succession planning.

- **RETAINING GP PROCEDURALISTS:** Over the last five years approximately 80 GP registrars have chosen to train with Bogong. Many of these registrars have undertaken procedural skills training in obstetrics, anaesthetics, endoscopy and emergency medicine. Further research is necessary to establish whether those who have trained in advanced procedural skills have gone on to practise those skills and if not, why not and what might be done to entice them back into procedural work.

- **OPPORTUNITY TO PRACTISE PROCEDURAL MEDICINE:** The current proposal by the Victorian government towards more flexible delivery of health care in rural areas, coupled with changes to public hospital funding arrangements, could present opportunities to lobby for an expansion of GP proceduralists' roles. This would include increasing the opportunity to practise procedural medicine by undertaking minor procedural work currently done by specialists.

- **ESTABLISHING A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD:** GP proceduralists and hospital CEOs agree about the destructive and adversarial nature of the Visiting Medical Officer contract negotiation process. If not satisfactorily addressed, the potential remains for high levels of conflict and the possible, even likely, drain of further GP proceduralists from the system. Statewide agreements are proposed as a feasible solution to this problem.