

Psychology staffing levels in Australian metropolitan acute public hospitals

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Background: Psychology is one component of the multidisciplinary services provided to patients in acute public hospitals, with research demonstrating that psychological intervention significantly enhances clinical outcomes for patients across a range of health issues. Despite the increasingly important role that psychologists play in Australian hospitals, there remains a lack of information available about staff levels, discipline structures and clinical activity for psychological services within acute hospital settings. The most recent Australian data about hospital-based psychology services was collected twenty years ago.

Method: 36 Australian metropolitan, acute public hospitals met the criteria for inclusion in the current study and were invited to participate. Of these, 15 managers or representatives of psychology services (a response rate of 42%) completed an on-line survey exploring information on psychology services, staffing configurations and models of service delivery.

Results: suggest that hospitals employ a highly skilled workforce at a rate of 0.16 FTE psychology staff for every 10 hospital beds. Neuropsychology services are provided less often than clinical/ health psychology, and are associated with significantly greater wait times to access services. The overall FTE of base grade and senior psychology positions were comparable and role diversity is common; with the primary role focus varying as a function of position level.

Discussion: The national ratio of psychology FTE to acute public hospital beds identified in the current study represents an increase in psychology FTE since the psychology workforce was last surveyed, however is still below national staffing recommendations. Given the demand for services, the inadequacy of staff resourcing, and the lengthy waits to access services—especially neuropsychology— it is imperative that psychology becomes proactive in identifying and articulating the contribution psychology can make to improving patient outcomes so that future healthcare reform initiatives have clear and pertinent data to guide strategic planning.