

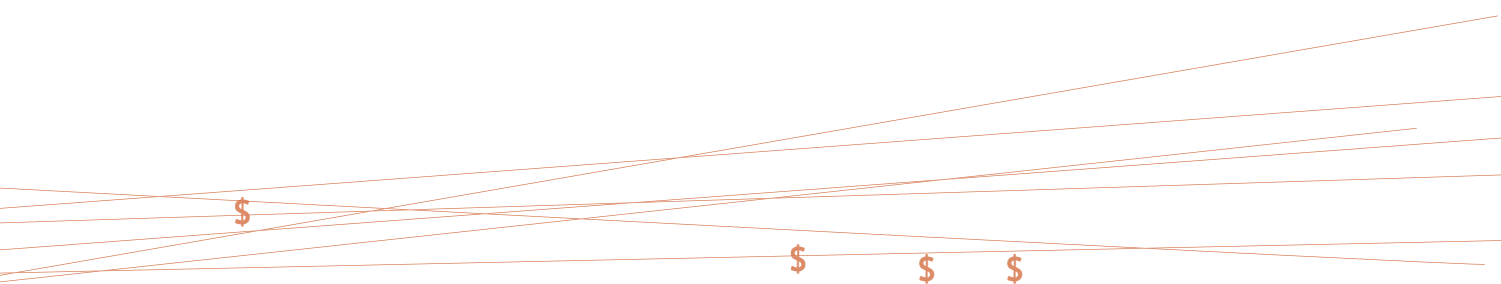
3: Specialists

Specialists are the second line of Australia's medical system. They see people for one-off consultations or procedures, and in some cases take over the long term care of people with complex conditions.

The Australian Government subsidises the cost of seeing a private specialist. It does not negotiate fees with private specialists, but sets a fee it thinks appropriate. Private specialists do not have to stick to this amount. However the Medicare rebate is based on that set fee. Doctors can decide to accept the Medicare rebate as the full payment for their service – this is known as bulkbilling – or they can charge their own fee. Their patients then claim back from Medicare some of the money they paid the doctor.

Following is a series of figures which lay out how many specialists there are in Australia, where they are, the extent of Australian Government funding of their services and the extent to which individuals pay for their services.

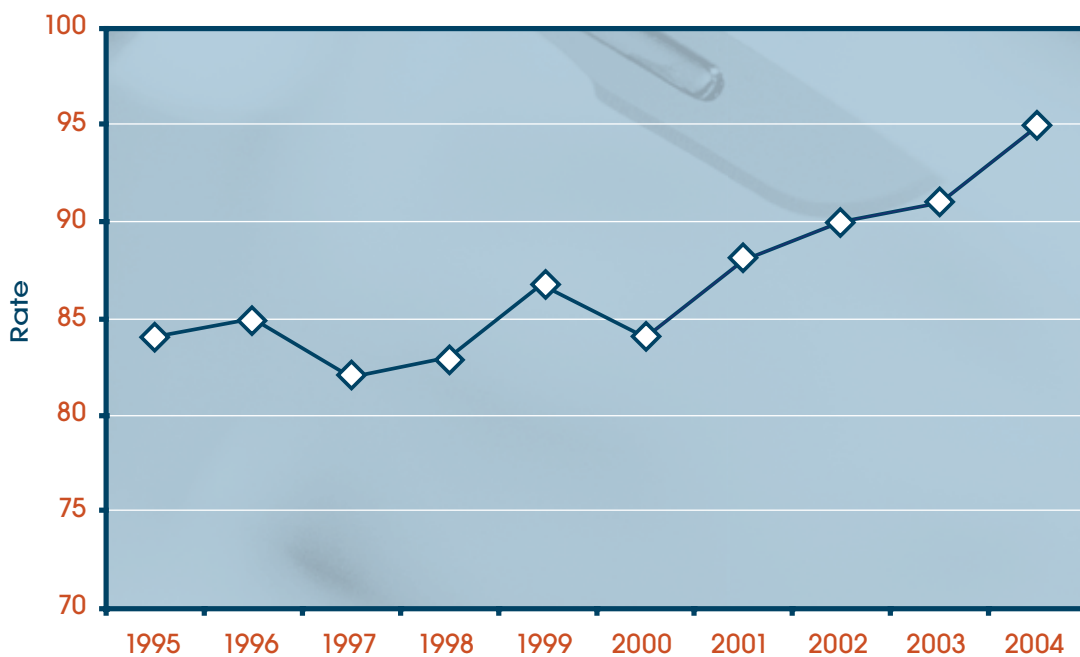
Please note that these figures refer only to out-of-hospital visits to specialists. They do not refer to specialists working in hospitals, or to operations or other procedures in hospitals. We do not have adequate information on the fees charged by specialists working in private hospitals, nor on the out-of-pocket costs of seeing specialists working privately in public hospitals. The Australian Government has access to this information, but does not release it.



How many specialists are there?

In 2005 there were 23,600 specialist medical practitioners registered to work in Australia. That is a dramatic rise from the 16,000 specialists practising in 2000. In contrast to GPs, the increase in specialists has exceeded population growth (see figure 8).

Figure 8: Number of specialists per 100,000 people



How often do we see specialists?

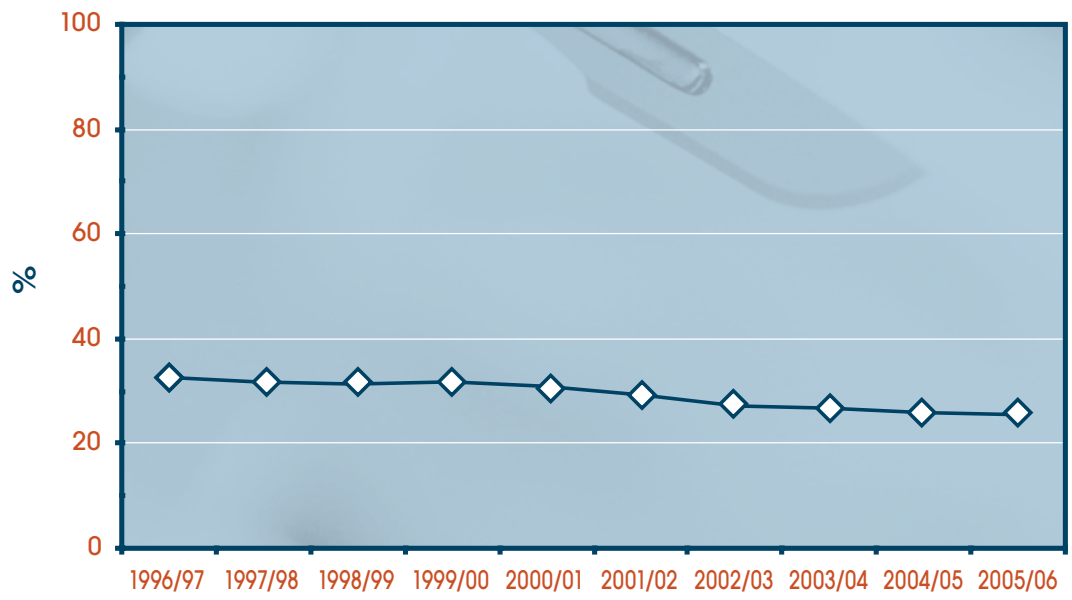
On average, Australians see a specialist (excluding pathologists and radiologists) once a year, and that has been the case for many years.

How much do we pay specialists?

Schedule fees for specialists are much higher than schedule fees for GPs. Despite this, only 26% of visits to specialists (excluding pathologists and radiologists) are bulkbilled.

The figure of 26% is much lower than the proportion of consultations which are bulkbilled by GPs (75.6%), pathologists (85.7%) and diagnostic radiologists (60.2%). Figure 9 shows that the bulkbilling rate is low and declining further.

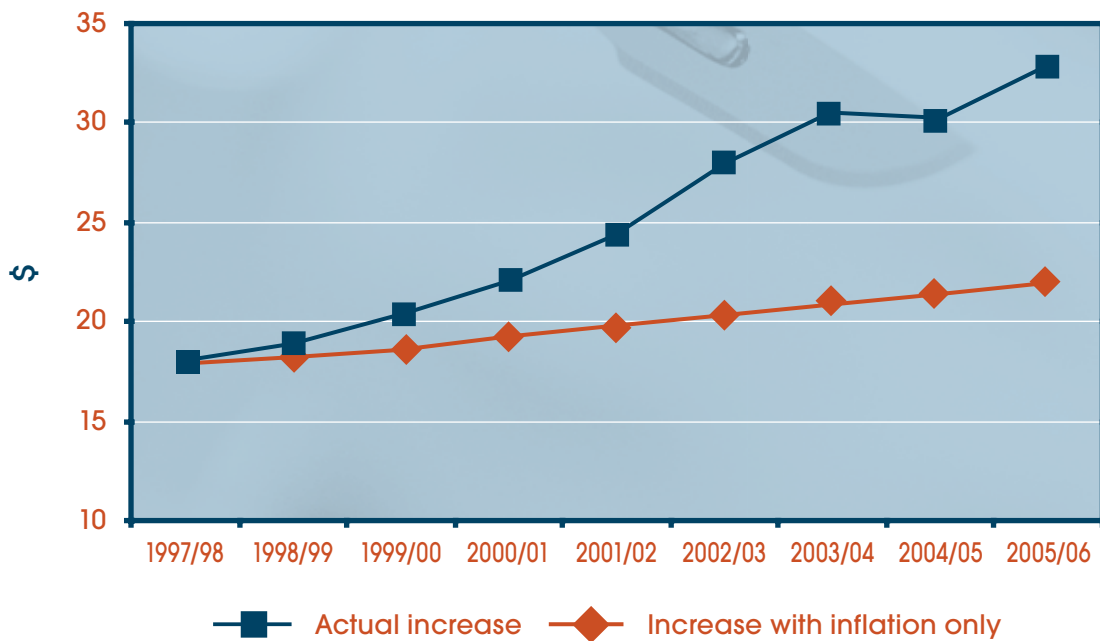
Figure 9: Percentage of specialist visits* which are bulkbilled (%)



* excludes pathologists and radiologists. Refers to out-of-hospital work.

The out-of-pocket cost of seeing a specialist, for people who are not bulkbilled, has risen from \$17.99 in 1996/97 to \$32.88 in 2005/06 (see figure 10). If the out-of-pocket costs had simply kept pace with inflation, the cost in 2005/06 would have been \$22.07.

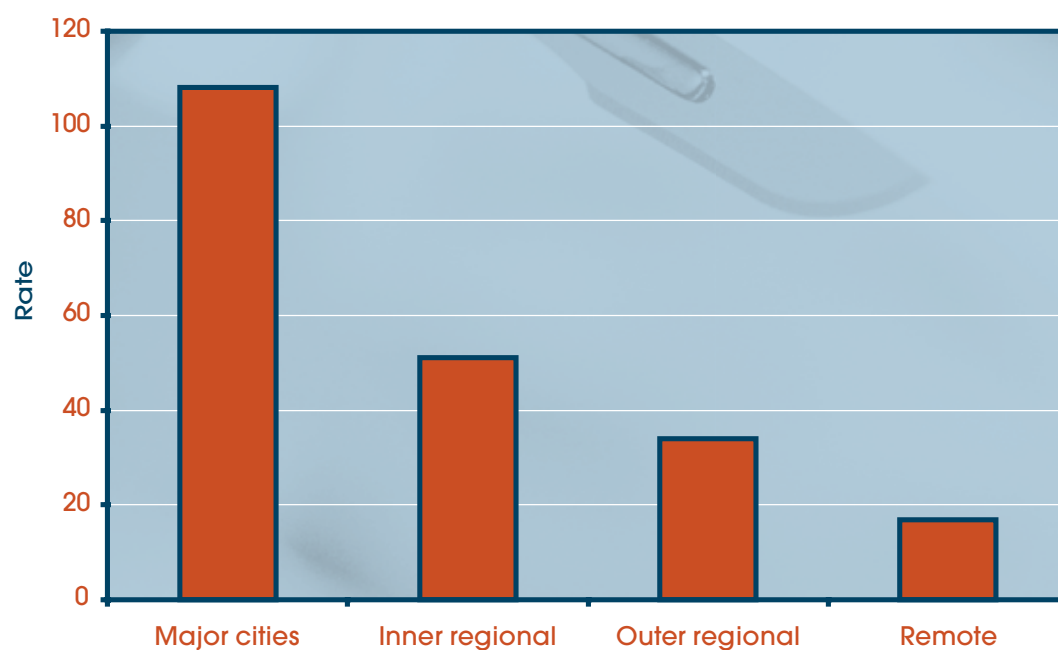
Figure 10: Average out-of-pocket costs of a visit to the specialist for non bulkbilled patients (\$)



Where do specialists work?

Specialists work overwhelmingly in cities. There are six times as many specialists per person in the city as in remote regions. Even areas just outside cities have half the rate of specialists as cities (see figure 11).

Figure 11: Specialists per 100,000 people by geographical region



What are we not being told?

There are many important questions which are not being answered by the Australian Government. They include the following.

- What is the average waiting time for a visit to a specialist for non-urgent care?
- Is this different for people in cities and people in rural and remote Australia ?
- What are the average out-of-pocket costs for private patients having surgery?
- What are the average out-of-pocket costs for private patients seeing an anaesthetist in a hospital?
- What is the bulkbilling rate for specialists in different local government areas?
- What is the bulkbilling rate for different types of specialists?
- What is the average number of visits to different types of specialists in different local government areas?
- What are the average out-of-pocket costs for people seeing specialists in different local government areas?

Summary

Specialists are highly concentrated in cities, and many rural people have difficulty seeing them.

The cost of seeing a specialist is rising. Bulkbilling rates for specialists working in the community are low and falling.

We have almost no information on the cost of private specialist services in hospitals. The Australian Government needs to release this information.