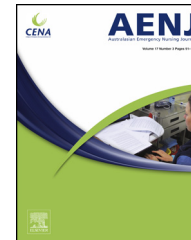




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RESEARCH PAPER

# Profiling nursing resources in Australian emergency departments



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## KEYWORDS

Emergency nursing;  
Staffing;  
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## Summary

**Background:** Emergency nurses have a key role in managing the large numbers of patients that attend Australian emergency departments (EDs) annually, and require adequate educational preparation to deliver safe and quality patient care. This paper provides a detailed profile of nursing resources in Australian EDs, including ED locations, annual patient attendances, nurse staffing including level of education, and educational resources.

**Methods:** Data were collected via online surveys of emergency Nurse Unit Managers and Nurse Educators and the MyHospitals website. Data were analysed by hospital peer group and state or territory. Comparisons were made using the Kruskal–Wallis Test and Spearman Rank Order Correlation.

**Results:** In 2011–2012, there were a median of 36,274 patient attendances to each of the 118 EDs sampled (IQR 28,279–46,288). Most of the nurses working in EDs were Registered Nurses (95.2%). Organisations provided educational resources including Clinical Nurse Educators

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(80.6%), learning packages (86%) and facilitation of postgraduate study (98%), but resources, both human and educational varied substantially between states and territories. One-third of emergency nurses held a relevant postgraduate qualification (30%).

**Conclusion:** There are important variations in the emergency nursing resources available between Australian states and territories. The high percentage of RNs in Australian EDs is a positive finding, however strategies to increase the percentage of nurses with relevant postgraduate qualifications are required.

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## What is known

- Staff in Australian emergency departments (EDs) manage over 7 million patient presentations annually. Emergency nurses have a key role in managing the large numbers of patients that attend Australian emergency departments (EDs), and require adequate educational preparation to deliver safe and quality patient care.

## What this paper adds?

- This paper provides a detailed profile of emergency department (location, number of treatment spaces, annual patient attendances) and nursing resources in Australian EDs, including emergency nurse preparation (skill mix, postgraduate qualifications) and educational resources. Organisations valued the professional development of emergency nurses, and provided access to educational resources including Clinical Nurse Educators, and access to postgraduate study. Despite this, only one-third of nurses working in emergency departments held a relevant postgraduate qualification.

## Introduction

Staff in Australian emergency departments (EDs) manage over 7 million patient presentations annually,<sup>1</sup> providing a fundamental role as a key access point for health care. Most EDs treat a mix of adults and children, and in 2011–2012, the median number of patients treated in each Australian ED was 34,645.<sup>2</sup> Nurses have an essential role in ED patient management<sup>3</sup> from triage to disposition, and spend more time with patients and families than other ED staff. Emergency nurses are the first point of contact for patients, and triage nurses are responsible for patient assessment, judgement of clinical risk and prioritisation of care.<sup>4</sup> In the waiting room, emergency nurses commence interventions such as analgesia, and arrange investigations including pathology and X-ray.<sup>5</sup> Following triage assessment, emergency nurses are responsible for comprehensive patient assessment and ongoing surveillance for the patient's entire ED episode of care. They are also responsible for initiating investigations and interventions within their scope of practice, before the

patient has been assessed by medical staff, and for discharge planning.<sup>6</sup> The management provided in ED often resolves the patient's presenting complaint, and 65% of all patients attending an ED are able to return to their place of residence without hospital admission.<sup>1</sup> The demand on EDs, and key role nurses have in patient management, highlight the need for appropriately prepared emergency nurses.

Patient care requirements are essentially the same, regardless of the ED patients' attend,<sup>7</sup> yet inconsistent resource availability<sup>8,9</sup> including the level of educational and clinical preparation of emergency nurses, can reduce equitable access to healthcare. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) identified 183 hospitals with EDs in 2010,<sup>10</sup> yet there is no single source of information which describes the patient demand or resources available within these EDs. The aim of this paper is to provide a detailed profile of nursing resources in Australian EDs, including ED locations, annual patient attendances, nurse staffing including level of education, and educational resources.

## Method

Data were collected using surveys. Ethics approval was obtained from Deakin University and 17 health care

**Table 1** Methodological definitions.

Term used in this study	Definition
Clinical Specialist	Clinical Nurse (Qld, SA, WA), Clinical Nurse Specialist (NSW, NT, Vic), Grade 4 (Tas), Level 2 Nurse (ACT).
Educational resources	Nurse Educator hours, Learning spaces, Hospital library, Internet access.
Relevant postgraduate study	Graduate Certificate or higher qualification in emergency nursing or critical care.
Treatment space	Any space in which nurses were allocated to provide care, e.g. resuscitation bays, cubicles with trolleys & chairs, procedure rooms such as suture or plaster rooms.

*Note:* Qld = Queensland; SA = South Australia; WA = Western Australia; NSW = New South Wales; NT = Northern Territory; Vic = Victoria; Tas = Tasmania; ACT = Australian Capital Territory.

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