

Primary Care Survey 2010

Dr Wong Tien Hua

Primary Care Survey 2005 – An Achievement

The Primary Care Survey conducted in 2005 was the fourth in the series that had started since 1988. It was however conducted differently from its predecessors, as the sample size, methodology and questionnaire were different. The survey in 2005 was sent to a randomly selected sample of approximately 40% of the 1200 private primary care practices at that time, and also sent to all polyclinics. It garnered an impressive participation rate of almost 94% from the GP clinics selected and 100% from the polyclinics, clearly underscoring the importance of the survey and the effort that MOH had put into planning and executing the survey. Credit also goes to all those GPs who had been selected and given their full co-operation despite the disruption and inconvenience caused.

A copy of the 2005 survey report can be obtained from the following URL on the MOH website: <http://www.moh.gov.sg/mohcorp/publicationsreports.aspx?id=3014>

Results of the 2005 Survey: Valuable Insights

To recap, the one-day survey in 2005 showed that although a private clinic opens for about 50 hours each week, the individual private resident doctor works an average of 36 hours a week, down from 43 hours in 2001.

The number of patients seen per day per private full-time-equivalent (FTE) doctor was 30 in 2005, down from 33 in 2001.

An estimated 50,600 patients attended primary care clinics on the survey day, out of which 78% went to private clinics, down from 85% in 2001, and the remaining 22% went to public clinics, up from 15% in 2001. The fall in patient load experienced by private GPs was therefore real and significant.

Policies implemented since 2005

The 2005 Survey was a wake up call in certain aspects, as MOH realised that the primary care environment was not sustainable with more and more patients flocking to the polyclinics instead of private clinics. The share of chronic diseases between private clinics and polyclinics also saw a shift towards the latter. Since the last 2005 Survey, the Chronic Disease Management Programme (CDMP) was launched in 2006 followed by a series of policy initiatives aimed at right-siting patients in the community. These include the Integrated Screening Programme (ISP) and extension of the Primary Care Partnership Scheme (PCPS) to cover chronic diseases to help patients right site from acute hospitals to GPs.

When I got a call from the Ministry of Health (MOH) for a request to help inform our general practitioner colleagues that the National Primary Care Survey is once again going to be conducted this year, I was a bit surprised as I thought it was not too long ago that we had the last one. But it was only after I looked at the file that I realised it has been five years since the last Primary Care Survey in 2005.

So much has happened in the past five years; back then we had to deal with SARS, now we have to deal with H1N1; a recession has reared its ugly head, but is now hopefully gone; we now have a third airport terminal welcoming an increasing number of people not only visiting but also looking for new opportunities to work

in Singapore; we have two casinos employing thousands of staff, and as for the medical landscape, new medical centres and hospitals are being added to both the public and private sectors.

One wonders how the primary care market has responded to all these changes. Anecdotal feedback is varied, and although highly unreliable, is always colourful and interesting. When patient numbers are up and workload is high, they can be attributed to an “outbreak of a new virus”, “stock market rally”, or to the “World Cup”. When business is bad and numbers dwindle, they can be attributed to the “heavy downpour”, the “new IR”, or to the “World Cup”. I think you will agree that it is certainly about time to conduct another Primary Care Survey.

Primary Care Survey 2010 (PCS2010)

The time has come to recognise that primary care has evolved one step further. The Primary Care Survey 2010 (PCS2010) will be the fifth in its series. Once again, MOH has obtained the support from the College of Family Physicians (CFPS) and the Singapore Medical Association (SMA).

Research Objectives

Building on the last survey conducted in 2005, PCS2010 provides another snapshot of the current landscape and continues trending of the morbidity profiles of patients, GPs' practices and workload, and how primary care is shared between public and private sectors, taking into consideration the impact of MOH initiatives and programmes that had been introduced after 2005. These research objectives are carried forward from PCS 2005:

- To gather morbidity and biographical profile of patients seeking primary care in both private and public healthcare institutions;
- To determine the private sector and public sector market shares in the provision of primary care;
- To obtain information on GPs' work practices such as workload and working hours.

What's New!

In the current climate where GPs work in partnership with other healthcare providers for more holistic and integrated patient care, it would also be interesting to see how GPs have embraced the concept of group practice, and various models of care, for example participation in CDMP, PCPS or RH-partnerships. Hence, the inclusion of new research objectives for PCS2010 are:

- To understand the business viability of GP clinics and the key operating challenges faced in sustaining the GP clinic business;
- To study and understand what GPs value in group practice models.

Confidentiality Ensured

As in the case of the last survey, both clinic and patient identifiers will be protected by various measures.

MOH will again appoint an independent research company to perform the data collection and clinic identities will not be sent to MOH. No patient names or any identifiers will be collected except for postal codes to help mark patient location and housing types. However, postal codes for landed properties will be truncated to the first two digits to prevent possible patient identification from

their exact location, but the road name will be required instead.

Altogether, 466 GP clinics will be selected to participate in the Primary Care Survey 2010. You could be one of the subjects chosen by randomisation, so please anticipate the survey coming your way on 22 September 2010 and do take the time to fill it carefully. GPs can self-complete or choose to enlist fieldworkers from the research company appointed by MOH to record and transcribe required patient data on the designated survey day – 22 September 2010. The information is routinely collected by clinics and would not require doctors to request additional information from patients. Remember, your response is absolutely vital; so mark your calendar and let us work towards a higher participation rate this time round.

What's more! Respondents to the survey will receive a print-and-bound copy of the survey findings to acknowledge their participation.

SMA

Primary Care Survey 2010

*Supported by the College of
Family Physicians (CFPS) and the
Singapore Medical Association (SMA)*

When : 22 September 2010 (One day)

Who : 466 GP clinics and all Polyclinics