



Updated GP and Specialist Numbers:

2011 and 2012

March 2013

1 Overview

The number of medical practitioners that actively practice in South Africa's healthcare sector is a disputed matter. Registrations with the Health Professionals Council South Africa (HPCSA) – where all South African GPs and specialists need to be registered in order to practice in the country – provides a biased estimate, as a number of registered GPs and specialists are practicing abroad or have moved to other occupations.¹

Since 2010, Econex has estimated what we deem to be more accurate figures on the number of medical practitioners actively working in South Africa. This note serves to update these figures for 2011 and 2012.

2 Number of GPs and specialists

We use data from two large medical scheme administrators to estimate the number of GPs and specialists working in the private sector. The data provide information on the total number of distinct practice numbers that submitted accounts² during 2011 and 2012. The data, however, have an inherent source of bias in that a group of GPs who practice at the same facility could have a single billing code for the facility and might not each have an individual billing code. In contrast, a GP who practices at multiple facilities could have multiple billing codes. Although we have insufficient information on the extent of these biases, in line with our previous estimates we assume that the two sources of bias cancel each other out.

To ensure that we achieve maximum representation of the sector, for each field of specialisation we selected the medical scheme with the largest number of distinct billing practice codes on their system.

Doctors who work in the private sector also sometimes work in the public sector, and vice versa. According to medical scheme industry estimates, 5% of GPs who work in the private sector also work in the public sector, and 10% of specialists work in the private as well as in the public sector.³ To estimate the number of doctors working in the private sector, GPs and specialists working in both sectors (and which are consequently reflected in public- as well as private sector datasets) need to be subtracted from the total to avoid double-counting when public sector and private sector data are added. As per Econex's estimates of doctor numbers in 2010, we assume that the most appropriate estimate is obtained by adjusting GP numbers downward by 2.5% in the public and in the private sector, and similarly adjusting

¹ Econex. 2010. Updated GP and Specialist Numbers for SA. *Health Reform Note 7*.

² One of the medical schemes also submitted data on the total number of distinct treating practice codes on their system. For the majority of specialities, the total number of practices who submit accounts to the scheme is fewer than the total number of distinct treating practices captured in the data. Due to the greater risk of overestimation than underestimation, we opted for using the number of distinct billing practice codes.

³ Econex. 2010. Updated GP and Specialist Numbers for SA. *Health Reform Note 7*.

specialist numbers downward by 5% in both sectors.⁴ Table 1 shows the adjusted number of GPs and specialists working in the private sector in 2011 and 2012.

Table 1: Number of GPs and specialists in the private sector

	2011	2012
GPs	7,648	7,673
Specialists	5,957	6,171

Source: Medical scheme data, Econex Calculations

Table 2 lists the adjusted number of GPs and specialists working in the public sector. The number of GPs working in the public sector increased by 1,094 from 2011 to 2012, and is in striking contrast with the number of GPs working in the private sector over the same period, which increased by a mere 25 individuals.⁵

Table 2: Number of GPs and specialists in the public sector

	2011	2012
GPs	11,376	12,470
Specialists	4,312	4,414

Source: PERSAL data, Econex calculations.

Table 3 shows the proportion of GPs and specialists working in the private and the public sector. It is interesting to note that, while the proportion of specialists working in the private sector remained constant between 2011 and 2012, the proportion of GPs working in the private sector slightly declined.

Table 3: Proportion of GPs and specialists in the public and private sector, 2012

	Private sector	Public sector
GPs	38% (2011: 40%)	62% (2011: 60%)
Specialists	58% (2011: 58%)	42% (2011: 42%)

Source: Medical scheme and PERSAL data, Econex calculations.

3 Concluding remarks

Summarized data in Table 4 shows the total number of GPs and specialists in both sectors. Our analysis finds that the number of GPs working in South Africa increased by 1,119 between 2011 and 2012, but that most of this increase occurred in the public sector. In contrast, the number of specialists increased by

⁴ Econex. 2010. Updated GP and Specialist Numbers for SA. *Health Reform Note 7*.

⁵ Although the disproportionately small increase of GPs in the private sector could result from biases in the data discussed in section 2, the increase in the distinct treatment codes submitted to medical schemes (contrasted with the billing codes which we use in our analysis) shows a similarly small increase.

315 over the same period, while the division between the private and public sector remained constant. Whereas the public sector appears to draw more GPs, the private sector seems to be more attractive to specialists.

4 Appendix

Table 4: Total GPs and specialists, public and private sectors, 2012

	Public	Private	TOTAL
GPs	12,470	7,673	20,143
Specialists	4,414	6,171	10,585
TOTAL	16,884	13,844	30,728

Table 5: Number of specialists by field of medicine (after data adjustments)

Practice Type Description	2011	2012
Anaesthetists	802	855
Cardiologists	137	134
Cardiology Paediatricians	14	12
Clinical Haematologists	13	13
Dermatologists	174	178
Gastroenterologists	55	52
Gynaecologists	706	735
Neuro Surgeons	135	138
Neurologists	100	105
Nuclear Medicine	26	28
Oncologists	12	16
Ophthalmologists	287	294
Orthopaedic Surgeons	519	536
Otorhinolaryngologists	243	251
Paediatricians	455	453
Plastic And Reconstructive Surgeons	136	139
Psychiatrists	441	465
Pulmonologists	44	44
Rheumatologists	32	31
Specialist Family Medicine	46	54
Specialist Medicine/Physicians	797	841
Surgeons	519	516
Thoracic Surgeons	86	90
Urologists	181	193
TOTAL	5957	6171