

### What is already known on this topic

In many Western countries nurses undertake most of the health promotion work provided in general practice, and they also have an important role in the routine management of chronic diseases

Nurse practitioners can achieve health outcomes that are as good as those of general practitioners, and patients are satisfied with the care provided by nurse practitioners

### What this study adds

Nurse practitioners do not reduce the general practitioners' workload, which can be explained by the type of tasks nurse practitioners perform

Nurses are not substitutes for doctors but provide a wider range of services than was available previously

Although general practitioners were enthusiastic about the nurse practitioners, adding nurse practitioners to the general practice team did not influence the subjective workload (such as job satisfaction and work stress) experienced by general practitioners

three groups of patients. Interviews with general practitioners in the intervention group indicated, however, that doctors believed that nurses had lightened their burden of care for patients in the targeted groups.

### Limitations of the study

The study was performed in only one region of the Netherlands, which may limit the generalisability of the findings. Several general practitioners were lost to follow up, which threatens the internal validity of the trial. Although not reaching significance, measures of objective workload were slightly higher among the general practitioners who withdrew. The dropout rate was higher in the intervention group and may reflect uncertainty at that time about whether government policy would continue to support the employment of nurse practitioners.

### Conflicting evidence

Some researchers have noted that nurses reduce general practitioners' workload.<sup>5 13-16</sup> Others have found no effect.<sup>17-19</sup> Differences in the effect might be explained by differences in nurses' degree of autonomy, level of training, and the conditions that they are asked to manage, or variation in the ratio of nurses to doctors.

Our findings are consistent with the view that nurses are often used as supplements, not substitutes, for general practitioner care. Gains for the efficiency of services can be achieved only if general practitioners give up providing the types of care they have delegated to nurses and instead invest their time in activities that only doctors can perform.<sup>20</sup>

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### Endpiece

#### A physician's tooth as an infallible amulet

When Nubians ambushed Mohammed Ali's son, Ismayl Pasha, they spared his Greek physician and "drew out all his teeth, which they divided amongst themselves to sew up in their *grigri* [amulets] bags, it being their firm belief whosoever carries about him the tooth of a physician (drawn whilst *living*) secures himself from all diseases for all time to come."

King CW. *Early Christian Numismatics and other Antiquarian Tracts*. London: Bell and Daldy, 1873:202

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