



Frank Quinlan – Federation Executive Director, Royal Flying Doctor Service

*Opening statement to the
Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport, inquiry into
the future of Australia's aviation sector, in the context of COVID-19 and conditions
post pandemic*

Good morning,

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Committee again today, on behalf of the Royal Flying Doctor Service.

As I presented yesterday to the Committee's *Inquiry into Australia's general aviation industry*, the Flying Doctor is a vital part of remote and rural communities, providing critical health services to areas of great need, particularly in places where low population numbers make it unviable for permanent services to exist. We have been providing these services for over 90 years and this includes on behalf of the Commonwealth since the early 1930s.

Our services include a 24 hour, seven-days-a-week (24/7) emergency aeromedical retrieval service for those who experience a medical emergency, and require urgent transportation to care in a tertiary hospital. This is an addition to inter-hospital transfers by air and by road, and extensive primary healthcare services including GP, nursing, mental health and dental health clinics; allied health services as well as health promotion activities, all supported by a 24/7 telehealth service.

With 79 aircraft at 23 aerobases, along with 140 road vehicles at regional bases, the RFDS provides aeromedical retrievals and clinic services at almost 200 rural and remote sites, and in 2019/20 provided a total of over 320, 000 patient contacts. These include aeromedical retrievals for almost 40,000 patients; almost 21,000 primary healthcare clinics (equating to an average of 55 per day); and, over 17,000 episodes of dental care. To achieve all of this, last year the RFDS flew 27,250,793km – equivalent to 34 return trips to the moon.

In a strong partnership with the Australian Government, the RFDS has been an important part of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, not least through aeromedical retrievals in rural and remote Australia, which have been in the order of 900 since the start of the pandemic in early 2020.

The RFDS is not only grateful for the opportunity to appear before the Committee today, but we are also particularly pleased by the focus of the Inquiry on aviation matters as they relate to rural parts of our country. We are obviously all aware that the COVID-19 pandemic has created unprecedented challenges, with aviation one of the hardest hit sectors. We've relied on a strong and safe aviation sector to provide critical health services since our formation 93 years ago. It is of the upmost importance that we ensure this during the response and recovery periods of this pandemic.



There are three key aspects of the impacts on the aviation that the RFDS would like to highlight as areas for focus in the ongoing COVID situation and as we move to recovery.

Firstly, the pandemic has had a significant impact on the Australian economy, nowhere more so than in rural and remote parts of our country. Investment in infrastructure will be a key element of efforts to stimulate the Australian economy and promote recovery.

A reduction in aviation activity including, and in many cases particularly, to remote and regional locations, has seen reduced cash flow for aerodrome operators. While aircraft movement may remain decreased for some time, remote airstrips and related infrastructure remains critical for the operations of organisations like the RFDS. It must be ensured that infrastructure is maintained and improvements move ahead to ensure locations are accessible, noting that in some rural and remote locations the condition of aviation infrastructure was already significantly inadequate prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. We are pleased to work closely with the Australian Government on these matters, for example working with the Department of Infrastructure to identify priority locations for remote airstrip upgrades.

Secondly, there is some significant uncertainty in employment in various areas of the aviation sector, including maintenance and engineering. It is pertinent to ensure that a skills gap does not emerge as a result of reduced demand in the commercial airline sector, that would have the potential to impact other areas of the industry. Approaches like diverting workforce from areas of the sector with less activity could be considered, with Government support likely to be required.

And lastly, be it in a pandemic period or otherwise, the importance of regional areas having access to air connectivity cannot be overlooked, not least for the purposes of moving workers from a variety of sectors, as well as transport, freight and to ensure the reliability of supply chains that are at risk of taking longer to recover than other parts of the economy. In these cases a national approach is required to ensure minimum access to essential aviation services for rural Australia.

Once again, thank you for having us here today, and I am pleased to take questions from the Committee.