



Rural Doctors Association of Australia
Submission to the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport
References Committee Inquiry into
The future of Australia's aviation sector, in the context of COVID-19 and
conditions post pandemic.

About RDAA

The Rural Doctors Association of Australia (RDAA) is the peak national body representing the interests of doctors working in rural and remote areas and the patients and communities they serve.

RDAA's vision for rural and remote communities is simple – excellent medical care. This means high quality health services that are: patient-centred; continuous; comprehensive; collaborative; coordinated; cohesive; and accessible, and are provided by doctors and other health professionals who have the necessary training and skills to meet the needs of their communities.

Introduction

RDAA thanks the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee (the Committee) for the opportunity to provide a submission to its inquiry into *The future of Australia's aviation sector, in the context of COVID-19 and conditions post pandemic*. RDAA has long argued that a health perspective should inform all policy and program development, and that applying a panoramic health lens will be critical to developing initiatives that are sustainable in the long term. The impact of COVID-19 on all aspects of Australian life reinforces the importance of such an approach.

That Australia's aviation sector was severely impacted by COVID-19 pandemic responses, has been widely reported and acknowledged. The closure of domestic and international borders and other public health measures which curtailed the operation of commercial aviation enterprises and the utilisation of private planes has impacted in ways that are yet to be fully realised.

This submission focuses particularly on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the aviation sector in relation to the health sector in rural and remote Australia and the resultant impacts on the health outcomes of rural and remote Australians. The good health of rural and remote Australians is a defining factor underpinning the economic and social prosperity of our nation.

RDAA recognises that at this point in time COVID-19 pandemic risks remain, and that recovery efforts will be hampered until such time as these risks are no longer of concern.

Key Issues

RDAA notes the following as key issues:

- Rural and remote people depend on the aviation sector to support the delivery of services to meet their physical and mental health needs. The aviation sector must be supported to meet this demand by:
 - maintaining and improving aviation infrastructure in rural and remote areas
 - ensuring that the skills of aviation sector personnel are not eroded by the reduced aviation activity
 - identifying and employing strategies to mitigate the health risks associated with communicable diseases for airlines, their employees and their passengers
 - ensuring that essential air connectivity is maintained to support the operation of rural and remote health services
 - ensuring the continuing availability of remote health and aero-medical retrieval services, including surge capacity.
- Pandemic responses, including the restrictions on international passenger services and curtailment of domestic air travel have created as well as prevented health issues for rural and remote Australians. While the spread of the COVID-19 virus has thus far been contained, the limitations on air travel have negatively impacted on their physical and mental health. The rural and remote health sector has also been impacted, not only with respect to the physical and mental health of doctors and other staff but also on the supply of clinicians to rural and remote areas.
- Minimising the impacts on medical supply chains is only one aspect of safeguarding quality health care in rural and remote areas. While this is an extremely important issue that must be addressed for the immediate and longer terms, the crucial role of the aviation sector in supporting rural and remote doctors and other health professionals to provide the care required by their communities, including patient and clinician transport, must also be considered.
- Planning for the future must include learnings from the current crisis in preparation of the aviation sector for any emerging health risks and future pandemics. The process should include targeted consultations with the rural and remote communities, including doctors and others in the health sector.

Response to Terms of Reference

RDAA provides general comments on Terms of Reference items a, b, c and f for the Committee's consideration.

a. the importance of Australia's aviation sector in supporting the economic and social wellbeing of all Australians;

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the inherent fragility of economic and social wellbeing and prosperity. As exemplified by what has happened in aviation, health threats that have the potential to affect the general population on a wide scale can bring industries to all but a complete halt and create a ripple effect throughout local, regional, national and global economies.

Australia's rural and remote areas are characterised by a diverse range of communities of varying sizes with economies based on activities such as agriculture, forestry, fishing/aquaculture, mining and tourism that make a significant contribution to the nation's

wealth and prosperity.¹ The degree of remoteness of these communities and a range of geographic, climatic, socio-economic, demographic and cultural factors create unique circumstances that impact on the liveability and sustainability of these communities. Many of them are reliant on the aviation sector to maintain many of their socio-economic activities and, crucially, their health. Poor health compromises the capacity of people in rural and remote communities to engage in economic and social activities.

The aviation sector has been decimated by the need to contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus and the consequent negative impacts on rural and remote Australia have been extensive, not only in relation to industries and businesses in sectors such as agriculture, fishing, mining and tourism, but also on the rural and remote public and private health services which are not only health care providers but also businesses and employers². In some rural communities the hospital may be the largest single employer. The flow on effects of these enterprises operating at reduced capacity (or being forced to close their doors) due to aviation sector limitations include job loss or insecurity and consequent negative mental health repercussions for staff, as well as possible poorer health outcomes in the broader community in the immediate and longer terms.

b. the immediate and long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic response on all aspects of the Australian aviation sector;

Various publications have detailed the role of the broader aviation industry as a contributor to national economies, including as an enabler of socio-economic activities in other sectors, and have identified risks for aviation associated with communicable diseases. These risks include: the spreading of diseases or viruses through air transport; exposure of aviation workers and passengers to health risks; possible adverse effects on the efficiency, and possibly the safety, of aviation operations; impacts on airlines and associated businesses including commercial profitability and viability; impacts on other sectors reliant on aviation; and broader impacts on national economies.^{3,4,5,6} Risks became reality during the COVID-19 crisis. Repercussions for the aviation sector were immediate and are likely to have continuing effects.

Assessments of the impacts of the COVID-19 virus on aviation in Australia and elsewhere have highlighted the shorter and longer-term economic ramifications^{7,8,9}. There are also significant implications for the health of the aviation sector employees and those working in associated industries (such as physical and technological infrastructure maintenance) who live in rural and remote areas if they experience job loss or temporary standing down.

¹ For example, the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment indicates that the “food industry is integral to Australia’s economic and social prosperity. It consistently accounts for around 20 per cent of domestic manufacturing sales and service income. The overwhelming majority of food sold in Australia is grown and supplied by Australian farmers. We are able to export more than half of our agricultural produce, while more than 90 per cent of fresh fruit and vegetables, meat, milk and eggs sold in supermarkets are domestically produced” <https://www.agriculture.gov.au/ag-farm-food/food> Viewed 14 December 2020.

² In Australia the Health Care and Social Assistance sector employs 14 per cent of the total workforce. Employment in the industry has increased by 16.5 per cent over the past five years. <http://lmip.gov.au/default.aspx?LMIP/GainInsights/IndustryInformation/HealthCareandSocialAssistance> Viewed 15 December 2020.

³ https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/aviation/future/files/future-of-australias-aviation-sector_issues-paper-2020.pdf Viewed 14 December 2020.

⁴ <http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/covid-19-and-the-aviation-industry-impact-and-policy-responses-26d521c1/> Viewed 14 December 2020.

⁵ <https://www.icao.int/safety/aviation-medicine/pages/healthrisks.aspx#anchor02> Viewed 14 December 2020.

⁶ https://www.skybrary.aero/index.php/Public_Health_and_Aviation Viewed 14 December 2020.

⁷ <https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/aviation/future/index.aspx> Viewed 14 December 2020.

⁸ <https://www.iata.org/en/pressroom/pr/2020-06-18-01/> Viewed 14 December 2020.

⁹ <https://www.statista.com/topics/6178/coronavirus-impact-on-the-aviation-industry-worldwide/> Viewed 14 December 2020.

c. the immediate and long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic response on all sectors that rely on aviation (e.g. tourism);

The impacts, both immediate and long term, of the COVID-19 pandemic response on sectors reliant on aviation such as tourism will best be documented by those sectors. However, it is important to recognise that the flow on health impacts, including on mental health, for rural and remote Australians whose livelihoods are dependent on those industries are considerable.

In particular, the restrictions on passenger flights and interruptions to the flow of needed supplies into Australia's rural and remote communities have had a negative effect on the physical and mental health of people living in these communities.

- Rural doctors, other health professionals, hospitals and health services have struggled to balance the demand for timely COVID-19 testing, results and treatment with mental health care and other non-COVID episodic, chronic and comorbid condition care.
- Rural and remote people already experience poorer health outcomes than people living in metropolitan Australia¹⁰ and these outcomes may have worsened as a result of pandemic responses. For example, the Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS) reports that presentations for issues related to cardio-vascular disease have increased following the isolation of remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities during the acute phase of the COVID-19 pandemic response when people were unable to access regular telehealth and face-to-face chronic disease management services¹¹.
- Reduced or cancelled passenger flights meant that recreational travel was curtailed, and that families and friends unable to visit each other experienced emotional distress. This has negatively impacting on the mental health of some people. Health issues may be aggravated and become chronic if contributing stressors persist.

Furthermore, the rural and remote health care sector is highly dependent on aviation to support the day-to-day operations of both public and private enterprises. Issues have included:

- Interruptions to the supply chain contributing to shortages of needed supplies, including Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)
- Poorer access to pathology services, including the time taken to transport COVID-19 test samples contributing to long turnaround times for results to be sent to doctors and their patients
- Impacts on the capacity to connect people living in rural and remote communities to further afield health services
- Impacts on the capacity to transport patients for treatment related to COVID-19 and for other reasons
- Impacts on the capacity to transport clinicians and other health professionals (including fly-in-fly-out health professionals and locums) to provide health services, undertake professional development for skills maintenance and development, and maintain self-health
- Impacts on the training of the next generation of rural and remote doctors, and
- Impacts on the recruitment and retention of doctors and other health professionals in these areas. International travel restrictions have meant that doctors who are trained overseas are unable to come to Australia. This is of particular significance for rural

¹⁰ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-health/rural-and-remote-health> Viewed 14 December 2020.

¹¹ <https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.08.16.20176230v1.full.pdf> Viewed 16 December 2020.

and remote communities which are reliant on International Medical Graduates to provide health services.

The capacity to provide and maintain quality health services in rural and remote areas will continue to be affected to a significant degree by a compromised aviation sector.

f. what policy and practical measures would be required to assist the industry to recover in the medium term;

Targeted investment to maintain aviation services to rural and remote Australia, including for maintenance of skills and infrastructure, health risk mitigation and remote health and aero-medical retrieval services, is needed to improve both the supply of and demand for aviation services.

This will help to ensure that air connectivity is maintained to support the operation of rural and remote health services which in turn will contribute to the economic and social wellbeing of rural and remote Australians and drive further demand for aviation services.

Conclusion

Without good health the capacity of rural and remote people to effectively participate in economic and social activity, and to contribute to national economic and social prosperity will be compromised. The aviation sector plays a significant role in ensuring that health professionals and services are supported to deliver necessary health care in rural and remote communities. This role must be acknowledged and supported through applying a health lens to policies directed at the aviation sector in Australia.