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Senator the Hon Matthew Canavan
Chair, Senate Standing Committees on Rural and
Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee

31st May 2024

Dear Senator Canavan

RFDS Submission to the shutdown of the 3G mobile network and telecommunications services accessibility

Thank you for the opportunity for the Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS) to contribute to this inquiry. The RFDS makes the following comments as related to the operation of our services and the accessibility of health services for rural and remote Australians.

About the RFDS

The Royal Flying Doctor Service is a national, charitable health organisation delivering primary health care and 24-hour emergency services to people living in rural and remote Australia. Long known as one of the largest aeromedical organisations in the world, the RFDS delivers health care where mainstream health services are not available, using the latest in aviation, medical and communications technology, and a far-reaching ground-service fleet.

The RFDS is a key provider of rural and remote prehospital care and retrieval services and is best known for its aeromedical retrievals. The RFDS also delivers a comprehensive suite of services including primary healthcare, mental health, telehealth, dental, medical chests, automated external defibrillators (AEDs) and Covid-19 services.

RFDS Concerns regarding shutdown of 3G network and lack of connectivity for Rural and Remote Communities

The RFDS has long advocated for better telecommunications coverage in rural and remote Australia. It is the position of the RFDS that reliable telecommunications and connectivity is critical to the existence, sustainability, and wellbeing of rural and remote communities. Many of the locations in rural and remote Australia that the RFDS provides services to have poor or no mobile phone reception and are considered "black spots" or still rely on 3G to communicate as they are in low population, isolated areas.

Federation Patron: His Excellency General the Honourable David Hurley AC DSC (Retd),
Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia

A lack of reliable connectivity, particularly in areas where there are no local health services, can create extreme and unnecessary risk during emergency situations and creates a barrier to receiving telehealth services. Furthermore, reliable connectivity enables rural and remote communities to do business, receive services and participate in a society that is increasingly online. RFDS stakeholders have expressed concern that there is already limited coverage on 4G and 5G in our service footprint and many areas still rely on the 3G network and landlines to communicate.

There have been further concerns expressed about the ability of isolated or vulnerable residents to upgrade their older devices. There are often no retail suppliers for devices in many of these areas, so people need to make orders online or organise a trip to a regional centre to upgrade their device before 3G is turned off to avoid the risk of being cut off. Meanwhile in some cases, the cost of replacing or upgrading a device might not be feasible.

Importance of Telehealth to Rural and Remote Australia

Each year, the RFDS provides around 80,000 telehealth consultations, making us one of largest providers of GP delivered telehealth services in Australia. A key element of our telehealth offering, our Remote Consultation service, is critical to rural and remote communities where there are few, if any, local services. Remote Consultation calls come into an RFDS base from individuals or health workers in remote and rural Australia who are seeking medical assistance or advice. The calls predominantly originate from areas where there is a significant absence of medical infrastructure, requiring that RFDS doctors resolve concerns and set treatment plans remotely, or determine the need for an aeromedical retrieval. RFDS doctors may also prescribe medical treatment, identify further care, and give first aid advice in an emergency.

While not a replacement for face-to-face services, telehealth is part of the solution to provide more comprehensive and regular health services, building on and complementing those provided in person. Over-the-phone consultations are valuable, however in many instances of health service delivery, videoconferencing provides additional advantages – for both clinicians and patients - and is increasingly becoming an important element of healthcare.

Barriers to Telehealth Uptake in Rural and Remote Australia

Over 90% of RFDS Remote Consultations continue to be delivered over the phone, indicative of the relative reliability and affordability of telephone services compared to other mediums, particularly in emergency situations. This is confirmed by anecdotal feedback from our patients.

Whilst the RFDS has seen uptake of videoconferencing and other digital health services slowly increasing, there are still several barriers to accessing services for rural and particularly remote communities. These include, for example, insufficient bandwidth allocated for healthcare - often results in frozen screens, lagging, and dropouts, which can be a frustration for both clinicians and patients – or the unaffordability of necessary infrastructure or available services owing to a limited market in these areas.

Recommendations:

It must be ensured that internet connections throughout rural and remote areas are sufficient, reliable, and affordable before the 3G network is turned off. It is imperative that rural and remote populations have access to the benefits of comprehensive telehealth services, and not be left behind.

By whatever means, the Australian Government must continue to prioritise improving rural and remote telecommunications connectivity to enable adequate bandwidth to deliver critical services such as healthcare. The assurance of reliable mobile phone service for people in these areas must be a priority in plans to shut down the 3G network, which must not take place until this can be ensured.

The RFDS is committed to improving the health of those living in the areas we serve, and seeks to work productively with communities, governments, other funders and healthcare providers to ensure all have access to appropriate, affordable and effective health services.

I would be pleased to discuss any of the matters raised in this submission with the Committee further.

Yours faithfully,

Frank Quinlan
RFDS Federation Executive Director