

***re: INQUIRY INTO INFRASTRUCTURE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF
AUSTRALIA'S REGIONAL AREAS***

The Royal Flying Doctor Service of Australia (RFDS) provides emergency and primary health care services to the people who live, work and travel in rural, regional and remote locations across Australia. The RFDS has nineteen Bases throughout Australia, including: Brisbane, Charleville, Mt Isa, Townsville, Rockhampton, Cairns, Alice Springs, Adelaide, Port Augusta, Yulara, Kalgoorlie, Meekatharra, Jandakot, Port Hedland, Derby, Broken Hill, Launceston, Essendon and Bankstown. At each Base a variety of professional and non professional staff are employed. These staff include, medical officers, nurses, allied health professionals (depending on the Base), Indigenous Health Liaison Officers, communications operators, pilots, engineers, managers, public relations staff, accountants and clerical staff.

The RFDS assists with sustaining regional communities in two main ways;

- the direct impact on the economy by the location of the Bases and,
- the provision of a comprehensive range of health services in a timely manner to these regional communities and the surrounding people.

Direct Impact on the Economy

The RFDS employs a total of 460 staff across Australia, in Bases ranging in locations from Port Augusta to Derby. The number of staff at each Base may vary however even a small number would impact on the employment opportunities for the town concerned. The location of the Base may also provide additional opportunities for the services that may be contracted out such as cleaning, maintenance, or information technology. The Base may also act as an emergency service area communication centre for disaster planning and cyclone warnings.

The presence of RFDS staff also assists the community in its employment attempts of other positions of either the same profession or other professions. The local residency of the RFDS medical officers and nurses provides the opportunity for clinical peer support that may be crucial in the recruitment of a medical officer for the local hospital. The medical officers at the Broken Hill Base have developed a strong link with the local hospital and the University Department of Rural Health. Other professional groups may also be influenced by the presence of the RFDS staff, not necessarily in a work context but in the numbers available in the pursuit of leisure and recreational activities.

The RFDS is well known as an Australian icon and so the Bases attract considerable number of national and international tourists. The Alice Springs Base has approximately 100,000 tourists every year. These tourists not only assist the funding of the RFDS but the community itself with additional services, such as accommodation, meals and supplies. The Mantle of Safety provided by the RFDS in the outback may also contribute

to the increasing number of people, both Australians and visitors travelling throughout the rural, regional and remote areas of Australia.

In the north of Queensland and Western Australia the RFDS provides an essential communication and co-ordination service prior to and during emergency situations, such as cyclones. The communication network of the RFDS is utilised to inform people of the pending dangers and ongoing updates of the emergency situation.

Provision of a comprehensive range of health services

The comprehensive range of services provided by RFDS are as follows :

24 hours Emergency Service:

Provision of emergency health services to victims of illness or accident who are in a serious or potentially life threatening condition.

Primary Healthcare Clinics at Remote Sites:

Regular clinics at isolated sites conducted by RFDS medical officers, flight nurses and other specialised health professionals and in some cases State health practitioners. Services include but are not limited to routine health checks and advice, immunisation, child health care, dental, eye and ear clinics.

Health Promotion:

A range of health promotion topics are provided at the scheduled clinics or via a road service on either a face to face or a group basis.

Radio and Phone Consultations:

Consultation by medical officers and nurses by radio or telephone with people at remote locations.

Communication:

The provision of radio communication through RFDS radio bases. With the advent of the telephone to the outback this role is declining.

Medical Chests:

Over 3500 RFDS medical chests containing an extensive range of numbered drugs and medical supplies are located at remote locations across Australia, such as isolated pastoral properties, Indigenous communities, out-stations, remote mining sites and lighthouses.

Inter Hospital Transfers:

Patients are transferred between small rural and remote area hospitals and larger metropolitan hospitals.

Search and Rescue:

The RFDS plane at the Townsville Base is utilised in search and rescue activities, either to assist other search and rescue agencies or to solely conduct this activity. This aircraft is specially equipped for this function.

The provision of these comprehensive health services ensures that a 'Mantle of Health and Safety' is available to the people of the regional communities and surrounding areas. These services are a 'life line' and provide the security needed to survive and remain in many locations.

The RFDS has continued to strive to implement innovative ways to better meet the health needs of the regional communities. One example is in Kowanyama, an aboriginal community on the western coastline of Cape York in Queensland, the RFDS provided a general medical practice clinic on a regular basis. However, the needs of the community was greater than the service being provided and so the RFDS implemented a successful new model of a full time medical officer located in the community. The medical officer is located in Kowanyama for four weeks and is then rotated to the Cairns RFDS Base for four weeks while the second medical officer in this model is rotated to Kowanyama. This innovative model has enabled the aboriginal community to have access to medical services at any time and also the medical officers are involved with a varied and interesting work environment. This model is being modified and adopted in other locations to assist the delivery of health services.

CONCLUSION

The RFDS has an extensive Australia wide health and communications infrastructure.

This existing infrastructure should be utilised by the Commonwealth and State Governments when implementing programs. This option provides a cost effective alternative to developing separate aerial services. The Commonwealth Government has elected to utilise the RFDS for the Fly In / Fly Out Female GP Scheme. Therefore the majority of the expenditure can be utilised on service delivery and not on the expensive component of aerial transport.

Increasing the RFDS medical network may also assist in the short term to relieve the crisis due to the lack of permanent medical officers on the ground.