

2015 Regional Telecommunications Review Secretariat
Department of Communications
GPO Box 2154
Canberra ACT 2601

By email: secretariat@rtirc.gov.au

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2015 Regional Telecommunications Review

Dear Committee Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input to the 2015 Regional Telecommunications Review. The Royal Flying Doctors Service (RFDS) 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 to support local health services such as hospitals, emergency departments, pharmacies and General Practitioners (GPs).

Our most well-known services include primary evacuations - flying to remote destinations to retrieve critically injured or unwell patients to transport them to emergency departments; and, inter-hospital transfers - transporting less critical patients across large distances to, or between hospitals, or back to their homes. The RFDS also provides regular fly-in fly-out GP and Nursing clinics in remote and rural areas and, of particular relevance to this review, a 24/7 telehealth service, which we refer to as Remote Consultations (Attachment A provides further information about how Remote Consultations are undertaken within the RFDS). From this experience of providing comprehensive health services to some of the most isolated remote and rural parts, including over the phone, the RFDS provides a unique perspective to this review.

In 2013-14 the RFDS provided over 82,000 Remote Consultations, with almost all of these calls originating from the remote and rural areas where we provide regular primary healthcare or emergency services. Demonstrating the particular reliance on basic telecommunication services by people in the bush, over 90% of these Remote Consultations were over the phone, including satellite and mobile phones. In 2012-13 for example, only 312 Remote Consultations were conducted through mediums other than phone. This may suggest a level of adequacy of standard telephone services in these areas, but also demonstrates the need to continue to guarantee this standard in these areas where such critical services are regularly provided over the phone.

Over-the-phone Remote Consultations are regularly supported by fax and picture messaging (either through mobile devices or via email) however, due high costs and ongoing issues with internet connectivity and stability in many areas where we provide services, videoconferencing is not widely used for our Remote Consultations. These technological issues and costs are significant barriers to expanding and enhancing our Remote Consultations service, and increased reliability would be required for videoconferencing to be appropriate, particularly in emergency situations.

National Patron: His Excellency General the Honourable Sir Peter Cosgrove AK MC (Retd)

Royal Flying Doctor Service of Australia ACN 004 213 067 ABN 74 438 059 643



As such, the RFDS strongly encourages the continued enhancement of telecommunications services (voice and particularly internet) in remote and rural Australia. For the RFDS, improvements would ultimately enable more efficient and effective operation of our Remote Consultation service including: increased ability and ease for patients to contact us; increased patient safety and responsiveness as a result of being able to collect and assess accurate patient information in a timely manner and potentially maintaining a connection while flying to reach a patient; and, better interoperability of electronic management and data systems.

The RFDS also notes the importance of more reliable telecommunications services in the bush in the context of other important health initiatives, such as the Personally Controlled eHealth Record (PCeHR). There are significant challenges for people in many remote communities without reliable and affordable internet access to participate in this scheme, and could be further disadvantaged in efforts to increase up-take and improve utilisation of the PCeHR (including through an “opt-out” model).

Reliable telecommunication services are crucial for the RFDS to provide health services to people in remote and rural Australia - for patients to contact us, but also for our workforce to do their jobs effectively, maintain contact with their family and friends while working in isolated areas, as well as ensuring we can be offering the best possible working environments so that we can attract and retain the best staff. Furthermore, it is the key enabler for remote and rural communities to remain viable, productive and to improve their lifestyles.

We appreciate the opportunity to contribute to this important review and would be very happy to discuss any of these matters further. Please feel free to contact my office on to arrange a convenient time.

Yours sincerely



Martin Laverty
Federation Chief Executive Officer

Attachment 1: RFDS Remote Consultations

Remote Consultations are the calls coming into an RFDS Base from individuals or health workers in remote and rural Australia who are seeking medical assistance or advice. They form the core of RFDS services and are an integral component of the suite of comprehensive emergency and primary care services provided by the RFDS.

Through Remote Consultations, the RFDS is one of the largest providers of GP-delivered telehealth services in Australia. This service has been provided to regional, rural and remote communities across Australia for over 80 years and is one of the most comprehensive telehealth programs in the world.

Remote Consultation calls are taken predominantly by RFDS doctors, all of whom are skilled specialist general practitioners with emergency medicine experience, and who are also trained, accredited and experienced in delivering telehealth services. Each year for the past 10 years, the RFDS has provided over 70,000 Remote Consultations, as shown in the table below:

Figure 1: Number of Remote Consultations, 2004-05 to 2013-14

Year	No. of Remote Consultations
2004-05	73,694
2005-06	77,135
2006-07	75,439
2007-08	86,927
2008-09	85,296
2009-10	91,623
2010-11	93,082
2011-12	88,530
2012-13	89,516
2013-14	82,346

Remote Consultations are intrinsically integrated with, and can be a precursor to, other RFDS services. For example, the aeromedical retrieval services that are perhaps most iconic to the RFDS are only conducted when patients require urgent, acute or critical care (or when telephone-based medical diagnostics (i.e. a remote consultation) is not possible). The RFDS Remote Consultations service is also the after-hours system for areas where we provide regular GP and primary health services on a fly-in fly-out basis.

The RFDS Remote Consultation system is fundamentally different and generally services a separate population group than other telehealth services, due to the fact that there is a significant absence of medical infrastructure in the areas where the calls originate from, so that it cannot be a triage or referral service. RFDS doctors instead resolve concerns and set treatment plans, with available data shows that over three quarters of calls received are resolved over the phone.

As such, an RFDS Remote Consultation can be considered the same as any other GP consultation – a doctor engages with a patient (through a phone call) provides a diagnosis and can immediately enact necessary follow up action, including an emergency response or authorised prescription for medication should it be required.