

Telehealth service provides lifeline

Who are you going to call if a member of your household has an asthma attack, injury or worrying fever or infection and medical help is hundreds of kilometres away?

For those living outside Perth or away from big regional centres, chances are it will be the RFDS telehealth service that provides the lifeline.

More than 35,000 calls for medical advice from remote-area callers are answered by the service's doctors at its Jandakot-based centre each year.

RFDS deputy medical director Sally Edmonds said conditions ranging from childhood ear infections, skin infections, rashes, gastroenteritis and bronchitis to more extreme cases such as anaphylactic shock, asthma attacks and croup were among those treated by the centre.

"The call might start as medical advice and we work out whether they can be treated there or whether we need to send an aircraft to pick them up," Dr Edmonds said.

"Often we can give them medical advice and through the medical chest

system can prescribe quite a range of medication, then they don't have to be transported anywhere and can be treated on site. We then call them to follow up the patient's progress."

Supplied to 570 remote locations and households, together with first-aid training, the RFDS medical chests contain 99 items including bandages and dressings, adrenalin for anaphylactic reactions, paediatric and obstetric items, antibiotics and analgesia.

First-aid training — provided in remote areas by the RFDS on the road program — also enabled people to more effectively communicate with medical staff as to how ill a patient was and be able to administer sometimes life-saving initial treatment, Dr Edmonds said.

Timely application of a pressure immobilisation bandage and arm splint to a 14-month-old girl recently bitten by a snake in Bencubbin had helped save the life of the toddler, who was subsequently flown to PMH by RFDS. In another recent case non-medical people, trained in first-aid, had been



Ready for anything: RFDS deputy medical director Sally Edmonds.

Picture: Greg Burke

able to give pain medications by injection to someone with a dislocated hip to keep the patient calm and comfortable until they could be evacuated.

In addition to flight evacuation and on-the-road preventive health services, RFDS doctors, nurses and Aboriginal health workers also provide about 20,000 sessions of on-ground treatment to patients in remote areas each year.

RFDS doctors staff the Meekatharra

hospital where they do 10,000 consultations to in-patients and in the out-patient clinics each year.

Dr Edmonds said 25 towns and communities including Marble Bar, Eucla, Mt Barnett and Tjuntjuntjara, were visited about every two weeks by RFDS general practitioners who last year did 3080 consultations and worked in partnership with the WA Health Department and Aboriginal Medical Service and Silver Chain.

Female GPs also provided 4316

women's-only consultations in 30 rural towns and a male Aboriginal health worker was available for men's health issues in the Kimberly area, where nurses also did child health, diabetes and kidney health checks.

"The populations we go to are without local access to a doctor — they are getting a GP out there maybe once a week, maybe once a month, so it is harder for them to go for check-ups, so often you see things that are more advanced," Dr Edmonds said.

Highway ambo has seen it all in the middle of nowhere

When it's a 400km round trip to medical help — often through floods, cyclones or roads crisscrossed by kangaroos, cattle and caravans — good first aid can tip the balance between life and death.

It's a scenario well-known to volunteer ambulance driver Mick Lanagan based at the remote Sandfire Roadhouse. For the past 11 years he has covered the 300km stretch of highway south to Port Hedland and surrounding pastoral stations, mine sites and the 80 Mile Beach Caravan Park.

On any day he can be called out to deal with serious injuries such as skull and limb fractures after a fall from a horse, heart attacks or strokes and, commonly on the highway, rollovers and crashes caused by speed, fatigue, drugs and alcohol.

Serious casualties are airlifted by Royal Flying Doctor Service to Perth or Port Hedland Hospital. Others can require road transport to hospital in Broome, which is 320km north of the roadhouse, or Port Hedland.

Mr Lanagan, a former stockman, who has advanced first-aid training, has always lived in remote areas. He dealt with all manner of injuries and health crises well before telephone services reached the region, using his country-style pragmatism and resourcefulness.

"I delivered my first baby when I was 18," the 63-year-old says. "There were no phones so I was on a crackly radio to a doctor in Derby."

"In the old days there might be times where there were heavy rains or floods and if you couldn't get out you just had to deal with whatever might happen, from a broken leg from somebody coming off a horse to a broken back to a snake."

But even nowadays with the vital



Highway to hospital: Volunteer ambulance driver Mick Lanagan is based at the remote Sandfire Roadhouse.

Picture courtesy of RFDS

backup of the RFDS, time is of the essence when it comes to serious injuries, Mr Lanagan says.

Others are often at the scene when he arrives and if they have given adequate first aid it crucially reduces the time taken to get medical help. It could save him half an hour on a 600km round trip to town.

Fortunately, first-aid training provided by the RFDS on-the-road program has up-skilled people living in the area. Mr Lanagan "roped" in roadhouse workers and neighbours on surrounding stations to do the training, so all have the confidence to deliver it in an emergency.

"If they have done the training with the RFDS they have the patient fairly well prepared to pick up," he says. "I don't have to treat that patient before I load them in the ambulance."

In one instance where a man had a suspected head injury from a four-wheel-drive rollover on a remote part of a station accessible only by rough bush track, first-aid training enabled those with him to

'Everyone should learn a bit of basic first aid, even older people, you might save one of your loved ones or you might save a complete stranger.'

assess his condition and decide it was safe to transport him to the highway to meet the ambulance.

"I just had to load and go — it was well managed," he says. "Everyone should learn a bit of basic first aid, even older people, you might save one of your loved ones or you might save a complete stranger."

Older people travelling north should remember to carry their medication, he says, as senior tourists account for most of his callouts.

"The problem is the majority don't take their medication with them. They are on holidays and will drive past four or five hospitals and collapse on my floor."

He said they also need to learn to tow caravans safely.

"They just don't know how to tow them . . . they get on the gravel and then they panic, sometimes you have a trapped patient and have to get the fires out from town — you could be dealing with them for hours."

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