



Media Release

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Flying Doctor Marks International Nursing Day

The RFDS South Eastern Section (RFDS SE) is marking International Nursing Day with a special event at the Charles Sturt University's Dubbo campus where a new generation of nurses are completing their Bachelor of Nursing degrees.

International Nursing Day is held on May 12 each year to mark the birthday of Florence Nightingale, who famously tended the wounded during the Crimean war and is credited with founding modern nursing.

"The RFDS has had its fair share of "Florence Nightingales" during its 87 years of bringing vital emergency and primary healthcare to Australians living in rural and remote areas," said Linda Cutler, General Manager of Health Services at RFDS SE.

"Last year alone the RFDS helped over 280,000 Australians who suffered major illnesses, traumas, endured difficulties during childbirth, or required clinical healthcare services."

"This year's International Nursing Day is especially meaningful as it is 70 years since the RFDS employed its first nurse, Sister Myra Blanch."

RFDS founder, the Reverend John Flynn, first identified the need for healthcare in Australia's vast inland, during his years of Outback ministry in the Inland Mission. He set up a number of bush hospitals staffed by nurses, including Myra Blanch, who worked at Innamincka.

However, as the RFDS only used doctors on emergency flights, Sister Blanch's duties were limited to delivering primary healthcare to rural and remote families and communities by road from a base in Tibooburra and giving community health talks over the pedal radio. If a mother she was tending was too ill to cope, she would also take over the running of the house and care for the children.

In the decades since, the role of the nurse has expanded greatly within the RFDS. Today the RFDS SE employs 42 flight nurses/ nurses. Some 80 per cent of RFDS SE flights now consist of a pilot and flight nurse team with a doctor accompanying if it's a serious emergency.

Being one of the world's largest and most comprehensive aeromedical organisations means the RFDS is constantly expanding its services and responding to the changing needs of the communities we serve. This has seen the creation of specialist nursing roles dealing with: mental health, drugs and alcohol, chronic disease and women and children's health. The RFDS SE also has a breast care nurse thanks to a partnership with the McGrath Foundation.

Current RFDS SE Nurse Manager, Judy Whitehead, has been a nurse for 33 years, some 23 of those as a flight nurse with the RFDS. She has witnessed great change in that time.

“It can be tough and demanding, but it can also be immensely rewarding and fulfilling, both personally and professionally,” said Judy.

“A nurse can arrive at an emergency to find the patient’s condition is worse than expected, or may have deteriorated during flight. A RFDS flight nurse needs to be able to assess, and manage the situation using their clinical knowledge, RFDS guidelines and where needed seek telephone advice from a doctor or specialist on the ground.”

“One of my treasured memories is of a husband and wife coming to the Base with a huge bunch of flowers, so grateful that we had saved the husband’s life. It is stories like this that inspire us to continue doing what we do.”

“Not all call-outs end so well and sometimes you have to accept that even your best wasn’t good enough to save someone.”

The RFDS will mark International Nursing Day by bringing its aeromedical simulator to the Charles Sturt University’s Dubbo campus. There some 32 first year students, 10 second year and 17 third year students are studying for a Bachelor of Nursing degree with rural and remote medicine a focus throughout.

The simulator is a full-sized replica of the flight deck and fuselage of a RFDS King Air B200 aircraft, which measures 9.1m long, 2.4m wide and 3m high and comes complete with flight deck and full aeromedical fit-out.

On boarding the aeromedical simulator visitors experience what it’s like to be a RFDS pilot, flight nurse, or flying doctor. RFDS SE Education Officer, Sarah Little, and a flight nurse will be on hand to explain the aircraft’s capabilities, what the medical equipment in these ‘flying intensive care units’ does and recount some real-life rescue stories.

The visit will afford the students an opportunity to see how cost-effective care is delivered to rural and remote areas via the RFDS and the flight nurse, which might inspire some of them to pursue this specialty.

“The enhanced role and professional recognition of the flight nurse is a highlight of the changes that have taken place during my career,” added Judy.

“There are now opportunities for career progression that were not available when I started. Nurses now make the RFDS a career choice rather than seeing it as a short-term ‘experience.’ There are also now specialised courses that flight nurses can undertake to further their careers.”

To become a RFDS flight nurse you need to be:

- A registered nurse with a minimum 4-5 years acute post-graduate experience.
- To have critical care (emergency or adult ICU) experience.
- A registered midwife (RFDS does offer scholarships to help registered nurses who meet the other essential criteria obtain this qualification).

“This may seem like a daunting list to a current student, but I can say from personal experience that it is well worth the effort as being a RFDS flight nurse is a job like no other,” said Judy.

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For more information or photographs, contact Nick Bleszynski, Media Consultant, RFDS (South Eastern Section) on 0403 931 291 or nbleszynski@rfdse.org.au

ABOUT THE ROYAL FLYING DOCTOR SERVICE

The not-for-profit Royal Flying Doctor Service has been taking the finest care to the furthest corners of Australia since 1928. The service provides 24 hour emergency cover to 90% of the Australian continent, via a modern fleet of specially equipped aircraft. In the past year, the South Eastern Section flew the equivalent of 6.25 round trips to the moon as it conducted over 5,000 clinics, took over 6,000 telehealth calls, had over 53,000 patient contacts and transported almost 8,400 patients.