



Royal Flying Doctor Service

National Mental Health Week – Flying Doctors see Spike in demand for Mental Health Services

Media Release

7 October 2014

The mental health team at the Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS) South Eastern Section, consisting of a psychologist, an alcohol and other drugs counsellor, a mental health nurse and a community psychologist, are reporting a 28 per cent increase in patient contacts on the previous year, the majority being men, and a threefold increase in phone consultations.

During 2013/ 14 the team provided 844 individual services in 18 locations and made 331 contacts by telephone.

The latest national statistics show that 20 per cent of Australians suffer a mental illness in each year and that women are twice as likely to seek help for mental health issues as men,¹ especially in the rural and remote areas serviced by the RFDS.

“In the previous year we saw just over double the number of female clients to males, but in the last year the ratio between male and female clients accessing the service has narrowed significantly,” said Linda Cutler, General Manager Health Services at RFDS South Eastern Section.

“The majority of mental health presentations for men and women relate to depression and anxiety.”

“The rise in patient numbers is in part due to the efforts of our mental health team in promoting mental health and wellbeing and fostering the idea that it is alright to ask for help.”

“Four years of consistent commonwealth government funding has enabled the RFDS to develop a trusted mental health services profile within local communities.”

The RFDS understands that there is still a stigma attached to mental health issues, especially in small towns, and many residents and workers have difficulty in attending clinic locations, due to work and care demands, so offer help through a variety of mediums.

To address this, in addition to providing face-to-face and telephone consultations, the service also uses secure digital communications including text messaging, email and Skype to offer confidential, convenient follow-up and support.

“The word about our services is spreading,” said Stephanie Busby, mental health team leader at RFDS South Eastern Section. “We are seeing current or past clients passing on our details and recommending family members, friends and work colleagues contact us.”

¹ Australian Department of Health, Mindframe National Media Initiative <http://www.mindframe-media.info/for-media/reporting-mental-illness/facts-and-stats>

“This suggests the mental health message is getting through and that the RFDS is a trusted provider.”

Recently, the RFDS attended the Broken Hill Agfair through its long term association with the University of Sydney Department of Rural Health and the Far West NSW Medicare local. In addition, thanks to a community partnership with Rabobank, the team also attended country shows across rural NSW.

At these events car-themed ‘pit stop and pearls’ health ‘regos’ checks were on offer. Although they cater for both males and females, the focus is on men who often view their own health as a lesser priority, and would get their car serviced before going to see a doctor.

“The multi-stage health check enables participants to undergo a comprehensive health screening, including a mental health and alcohol check, in just 30 minutes and has proved very effective,” said Ms Busby.

“For example, of the people attending a recent screening we found that approximately 18.2% identified risks for mental health, over 29% for alcohol risk and 41% were referred to their GP for a follow-up, which indicates the value of this approach.”

Late last year the RFDS did a special “fly-around” clinic, which takes a team of health professionals on short day trips to isolated stations and towns once or twice each year, ensuring that scarce specialised services make it out to some of the State’s most remote communities.

The women’s health “fly around” saw noted relationship councillor, Dr Rosie King, accompanying the RFDS women & child, family health nurse and midwife, breast care nurse, medical officer and mental health councillor to eight remote locations in Far Western NSW. The “Navigate your life - Men & Women: bridging the gap” clinics, integrated with community events such as Melbourne Cup day, saw Dr King give advice about relationships, communication, conflict, mismatched sexual desire, libido, depression and antidepressants.

The sharp increase in patient numbers and telephone consultations also indicates that many people in rural and remote areas are still doing it tough. Although most areas of NSW recorded average or above average falls of rain over winter, southern and central areas missed out. With drier than normal conditions forecast and pasture growth only average, there is little relief in sight for drought-affected communities.²

“Prolonged drought conditions can add to financial pressures, social isolation, lack of control, relationship pressure and increased feelings of worthlessness. These symptoms are consistent with depression and untreated can result in desperate acts, including suicide,” said Ms Cutler.

“If someone is experiencing a depressive disorder there can also be an increase in alcohol and/ or substance abuse which significantly amplifies their feelings, and increases the risk of physical health issues and associated impacts on their families.”

² NSW Department of Primary Industries, *NSW Seasonal Conditions Summary September 2014*
<http://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/agriculture/drought-bushfire-and-emergencies/seasonal-conditions/regional-seasonal-conditions-reports/seasonal-conditions/nsw-seasonal-conditions-summary-sept-2014>

“There are a range of services and community support initiatives available in many areas – the RFDS for example has teams of primary healthcare professionals including GPs, psychologists and mental health nurses who fly out to remote clinics and are well-equipped to address these sorts of issues.”

If you or someone else you know is experiencing stress, depression, anxiety or other mental health difficulties they can contact the RFDS mental health team. Alternatively, there are national organisations, which can be contacted over the phone or online for support:

Lifeline: 13 11 14

Lifeline Service Finder: lifeline.serviceseeker.com.au

Kids Helpline: 1800 55 1800

MensLine Australia: 1300 78 99 78

SANE Australia helpline: 1800 18 SANE (7263) or www.sane.org

Mindhealthconnect: www.mindhealthconnect.org.au

beyondblue: the national depression initiative: 1300 22 4636 (1300 bb info) or www.beyondblue.org.au

Black Dog Institute: www.blackdoginstitute.com.au

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For more information or photographs, contact:

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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.