Media Release

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Bush asks for more doctors, mental health, and drug and alcohol services

Overcoming barriers in access to medical services is the most important consideration of health consumers in country Australia, a Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS) research report on health needs of rural and remote residents has found.

The RFDS survey of country health consumer priorities was released 100 years to the day since the first patient was treated by a pioneering doctor in Western Australia, leading to the founding of the RFDS which is now recognised as Australia’s most reputable charity.

The survey of 450 country people drawn from every state and territory saw one-third of respondents (32.5%) name doctor and medical specialist access as their key priority. Addressing mental health (12.2%) and drug and alcohol problems (4.1%) were second and third priorities.

When asked where additional health expenditure should be targeted, 32.2% of respondents said more funding was needed to expand access to medical services in country areas. 14.6% called for more funding of mental health programs and health prevention and promotion was identified by 8.6% as the third priority for more funding.

Positively, more than two-thirds of respondents (68.7%) said they travelled less than an hour to see a doctor for a non-emergency, with the remaining respondents travelling anywhere from one to five hours. Four percent of respondents travelled for more than five hours to see a doctor.

More than half (58.3%) of respondents saw a doctor within four hours for urgent medical care, with the remaining seeing a doctor anywhere from the same day to six or more days later.

RFDS CEO Martin Laverty said “Country health consumers haven’t always had a voice in national debate. The survey has given them a voice. The voice of the bush says more needs to be done to ensure country people can see health professionals in person or via telehealth when needed.

“The research findings are pretty stark. Country people have said they are missing out on seeing medical specialists. They miss out on some pathology and diagnostic tests. The want more attention on health prevention to halt illness before it starts.

“The survey findings endorse decisions of successive governments who’ve invested in rural health, but the survey demands more be done. A rural health strategy for better access to doctors and medical specialists, supported by more health prevention, is needed,” Mr Laverty said.

The RFDS survey was conducted in partnership with the National Farmers Federation, and with the support of the Country Women’s Association.

Media resources are available at www.flyingdoctor.org.au/media, including infographics and sound/video bites with National Farmers Federation CEO Tony Mayer, Country Women’s Association President Dorothy Coombes and RFDS CEO Martin Laverty.

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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 facilitated almost 4,500 clinics, took over 5,500 telehealth calls, had over 49,100 patient contacts and transported almost 8,200 patients.