

Media release embargoed for publication 6am Tuesday 1 August 2017

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

The research paper "*Health Care Access, Mental Health, and Preventative Health; Health Priority Survey Findings for People in the Bush*" and many media resources are available at <https://www.flyingdoctor.org.au/New-Research-Paper/> 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.

How a Kimberley stockman's fall 100 years ago led to the Flying Doctors

On 29 July 1917, Kimberley stockman Jimmy Darcy suffered massive internal injuries when his horse fell in a cattle stampede. An 80-kilometre ride on a dray over a rough track took him to the nearest settlement of Halls Creek in far north Western Australia.

Mr Darcy needed immediate lifesaving surgery. The nearest doctor, Dr Joe Holland, was thousands of kilometres away. Using Morse code, Halls Creek postmaster Fred Tuckett was guided to perform emergency surgery with a penknife and morphine. Mr Darcy survived.

Over several days, newspaper readers around Australia were gripped by the story of the young stockman's desperate struggle for life. The operation had been a success, but the 29-year-old stockman was weak and malaria set in. Mr Darcy died just hours before a doctor arrived, who had travelled for almost two weeks over the harshest of landscapes in a mercy dash to try and save him.

The death of Jimmy Darcy attracted national headlines and proved the impetus for an outback aeromedical service, today is known as the RFDS. The first RFDS flight would not occur until eleven years later in 1928, but Mr Darcy's case proved the need for better access to medical care in country Australia.

One hundred years on from Mr Darcy's accident and subsequent death, access to emergency and primary health services has drastically improved. Yet people in the bush see a doctor at half the rate of those in the city, see a dentist at one third the rate, and a mental health specialist at one fifth the rate.

Overcoming barriers in access to health care remains the RFDS's priority, 100 years on from Mr Darcy's emergency surgery.

Visit <https://www.flyingdoctor.org.au/news/stockmans-story-begins-flying-doctor/> for more on the story of Mr Jimmy Darcy.