

OUTBACK CHALLENGE

*The Royal Flying
Doctor Service celebrates
80 years of helping
people in remote
parts of Australia*

By Peter Morgan



THE DAUNTING VASTNESS of Australia's ancient, sun-burnt landscape poses huge logistical problems for the provision of essential services, especially health care.

The Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS) was formed in 1928 to combat the isolation of communities, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, throughout the Outback.

And now the Flying Doctor is celebrating its 80th anniversary by launching a major health programme for the remote areas of South Australia, thanks to vital funding from the Li Ka Shing Foundation.

The Foundation has agreed to fund the 10-year Healthy Living Programme that promotes, encourages and supports healthy lifestyle changes throughout the Outback.

The basic strategy is to actively promote the benefits of increased physical activity and improved dietary intake while providing regular access to important health education.

The AUD3 million (about HKD22 million) funding is the largest sponsorship of its kind in the distinguished



The Healthy Living Programme is targeting 1,000 participants

history of the Flying Doctor, which is recognised as the largest and most comprehensive aero-medical organisation in the world.

“The RFDS provides a crucial lifeline to those who live, work and travel in rural and remote Australia,” says Peter Tulloch, the Chairman of the programme’s management committee.

“With a long history of promoting educational, health and humanitarian initiatives around the world, the Li Ka Shing Foundation is committed to supporting pioneering projects that foster a better society. We believe that this long-term initiative will bring immense benefits to the remote communities of the Outback.”

Mr Tulloch is also the Chairman of South Australian electricity

company ETSA Utilities and two other Australian power companies, Citipower and Powercor, which are all jointly majority owned by Cheung Kong Infrastructure Holdings Limited and Hongkong Electric Holdings Limited.

The Flying Doctor has recognised the invaluable contribution by its latest benefactor by branding a fully medically equipped Pi-latus PC-12 aircraft with the name of the Li Ka Shing Foundation. However, as the programme targets many small communities, its two full-time health professionals usually criss-cross the north and northwest regions of South Australia by vehicle.

The programme is targeting 1,000 participants in remote com-



The Royal Flying Doctor Service provides a lifeline for those who live in rural and remote Australia by treating the sick and encouraging healthy lifestyles.

in remote communities

communities such as Oodnadatta, Woomera and Marree, where the combined total population is about 10,000. As the project becomes established, new families and participants will be recruited.

“Some changes in lifestyle habits may appear simplistic but their effect can be quite dramatic,” says Dr John Setchell, General Manager Health Services, RFDS Central Operations. “Even basic forms of physical activity such as walking can achieve significant beneficial outcomes. The long-term support offered by the Li Ka Shing Foundation will allow us to facilitate the generational changes necessary to improve

FACTS AND FIGURES				
	Central Operations*		National	
Service Area (million sq. km)	2.3		7.15	
Number of Staff	120		705	
Number of Aircraft	11		47	
Number of Aircraft Bases	3		21	
Number of Health Facilities	3		6	
	Daily	Annually	Daily	Annually
Patients Attended	141	51,391	665	242,547
Aeromedical Evacuations**	21	7,604	96	35,089
Distance Flown (km)	12,330	4,500,336	59,492	21,714,595
Number of Landings	35	12,706	178	65,074
Healthcare Clinic Visits	10	3,506	34	12,247
Telehealth Consultations	37	13,439	207	75,439

* Based in South Australia

**Aeromedical transfers includes emergency evacuations and hospital transfers

the overall health of people in these communities.”

The RFDS identified a gap in the provision of this kind of information in remote communities and, just as importantly, the resource commitment needed to make a real difference.

RFDS Central Operations CEO, John Lynch, says: “It was one issue to identify the need for the project and then another to obtain the financial resources to implement a meaningful programme.

“The contribution of the Li Ka Shing Foundation is truly extraordinary. This area of proactive health promotion will become an increasingly important priority for the RFDS.”

Each person involved will be regularly monitored to assess changes in their condition and be provided with guidance and support to encourage on-going commitment to the programme.

In Australia, significant differences exist in the health status of Australians living in remote areas versus those in metropolitan areas, and also between Aboriginal versus non-Aboriginal Australians. Reducing these differences is a priority for this programme.

By addressing a range of obesity-related issues, improved health outcomes anticipated include reduced complications of diabetes, improved blood pressure control and reduced levels of cardio-vascular disease. These outcomes will support the broader aims of the Flying Doctor to improve health through enhanced preventative health care programmes.

Before the Foundation became involved in the programme, Mr Tulloch spent two days visiting the remote communities. “The communities were surprisingly deprived and there was a real sense of isolation,” he says. “With red earth everywhere, the people can’t grow anything. It was an eye-opener to see the challenges, including health challenges, of people living out there, trying to live in traditional ways.

“These communities are just crying out for progress. There are lifestyle issues like malnutrition. I kept wondering how this could happen in an affluent country like Australia.”

Mr Tulloch says he came away convinced it was necessary and important for health initiatives to be introduced. “It’s basic stuff we are talking about but it’s important and makes a difference to a lot of people. The cycle needs to be broken,” he says.

He was immediately attracted to the reputation and track record of the Flying Doctor in delivering Outback “miracles.” “I saw the strength of the RFDS to these wider communities. It’s not just about treating broken legs, but lifestyle, exercise, and diet,” he says.

For the second time in the past four years, the Flying Doctor has been awarded the title of Australia’s Most Trusted Charity in an independent national survey conducted by *Reader’s Digest* magazine.

“I think there is a heartfelt belief out there in the community that the RFDS can always be relied upon and this is reflected in the survey results,” says Mr Lynch. “We may not be the most prominent organisation in terms of everyday public exposure, but our crews are always there – 24 hours, every day of the year, come rain or shine.”

It’s not just about treating broken legs,



PHOTOS: RIGHT, THE AUSTRALIAN; TOP LEFT & RIGHT, THE ROYAL FLYING DOCTOR SERVICE

Clockwise from left: **Peter Tulloch, Chairman of ETSA Utilities, talks about the Li Ka Shing Foundation funding for the RFDS healthcare programme – “These communities are just crying out for progress”**; Children receiving check-ups from RFDS staff, who travel huge distances to reach remote communities.



but lifestyle, exercise and diet



HOW IT ALL BEGAN

THE gradual development of Australia's vast Outback was made easier with the establishment of the world's first comprehensive aerial medical service.

The Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS) was established by a cleric, Reverend John Flynn, in 1928. In its first year, it flew 28,000 kilometres, providing medical help to 255 patients and saving four lives.

Previously, serious illness or accident often meant death for those living, working or travelling through the Outback. Many would have lived had they received medical aid quickly enough.

Today, the RFDS remains unique for the range of primary health care and emergency services it provides and for the huge area of sparse population and climatic extremes over which it operates – 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

In its 80th year, the Flying Doctor will fly more than 21 million kilometres and provide medical assistance to around 250,000 people – that's one every two minutes.



The RFDS, a not-for-profit organisation, today:

- Operates 21 aircraft bases across Australia
- Manages six remote health facilities
- Maintains a fleet of 47 aircrafts, each costing AUD6 million
- Employs a staff of more than 700

While supported by Australia's national and State governments, the Flying Doctor relies heavily on fundraising initiatives and the support of valued benefactors such as the Li Ka Shing Foundation.