



Pathways to Progress: Healthcare Access in Rural Victoria

Abstract title: Building a Sustainable Rural Healthcare Model: A Case Study from Robinvale, Victoria

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Introduction

The Royal Flying Doctors Service Victoria (RFDS) is always looking at new ways to enhance primary healthcare services in rural communities, beyond traditional aeromedical transport and telehealth roles. In the town of Robinvale, a critical healthcare challenge emerged when the sole resident full-time general practitioner, Dr Jane Neyland, sought to transfer the ownership of her medical clinic due to overwhelming workload. The clinic provides comprehensive primary care services to the town and surrounding areas. Its closure would reduce access to health care for Robinvale's documented 3,313 residents.

Method

RFDS Victoria liaised with Dr Neyland about ways services may be able to be sustained, and then commissioned Larter Consulting (Larter) to undertake broader consultation and formulate a business case for change. Larter recommended RFDS consider acquiring the clinic and expanding primary care service in Robinvale. The approach was guided by RFDS Victoria's strategic vision of supporting coordinated multidisciplinary care; advanced use of digital health; and exploring innovative models tailored to community needs. The business case included a refreshed operational model, workforce strategies, financial considerations, and innovation strategies. Local stakeholder consultation was pivotal in identifying opportunities to integrate with other providers and expanding services to meet more community need.

Results

The outcome of this collaborative effort was the successful acquisition of the Robinvale District Medical Centre by RFDS Victoria on May 1, 2023. This achievement (1) ensured that the rural community of Robinvale maintained ongoing access to a reliable medical practice (2) maintained the clinical services of Dr Neyland (3) plants strategies to enhance community access to primary care (4) Helped fulfil RFDS Victoria's commitment to address market failure in rural Australia.

Furthermore, the work identified opportunities to meet broader community need such as specialised care for student and migrant populations working in agriculture. This strategic expansion aligns with RFDS' primary healthcare strategy, offering confidence to extend similar discussions to other rural towns facing market failure, broadening healthcare access and leveraging cutting-edge digital health interventions.

Conclusion

The collaboration between a general practice, a consulting firm and RFDS serves as a notable success story, underlining the potential of collaboration to revitalise rural healthcare by 'thinking outside the box'. The experiences gained are already informing future considerations to address healthcare challenges in rural regions.