



18 December 2020

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Via online submission

Dear Committee Members

Re: The future of Australia's aviation sector, in the context of COVID-19 and conditions post pandemic

The mental health and wellbeing of individuals in the aviation industry and throughout industries that rely upon it, is of concern to the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZCP). The RANZCP supports the continuation of the Australian Government's *Better Access Pandemic Support* measures, and we recommend that efforts are made to increase awareness of available help to those in the aviation industry.

The RANZCP is the principal organisation representing the medical specialty of psychiatry in Australia and New Zealand and is responsible for training, educating and representing psychiatrists on policy issues. The RANZCP represents over 5100 qualified psychiatrists and more than 1800 trainee members and is guided on policy matters by a range of expert committees.

The RANZCP commends the Commonwealth Government's decision to extend its support to the Domestic Aviation Network Support (DANS) program and the Regional Airline Network Support (RANS) program into 2021. These two programs have been essential to maintain baseline connectivity on smaller routes which are the lifeblood of many rural and remote locations. As an aspect of these programs going forward and in future initiatives, the RANZCP recommends that additional mental health supports be considered for inclusion in conjunction with these support packages.

A concurrent issue of importance to the RANZCP is that of psychiatrists working in rural and remote areas as visiting medical officers (VMOs), in a fly-in fly-out (FIFO) capacity. While consultations via telehealth have met some of the needs of individuals and communities, there remains an urgent need for psychiatrists to provide face to face services for acute and complex inpatient hospital care in rural and remote locations. The care provided by psychiatrists is essential to ensure ongoing patient wellbeing and to minimise the possibility of acute behavioural disturbance, which can place other staff at additional risk.



The RANZCP affirms the importance of ongoing subsidisation of flights to rural and remote areas as a means to maintaining service provision. These flights enable specialists to safely and effectively make the trip to communities and return home without having to travel long distances by road or spend extended time away from family, which is not a sustainable solution to shortages. At present the RANZCP is concerned that in many jurisdictions ad-hoc arrangements are filling the gaps in mental health service provision. Utilising established service models, like the partnership between the Royal Flying Doctor Service and Local Health Districts in Far West NSW, have proven to provide a more continuous service that is support of better health outcomes.

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the social and emotional lives of those in the aviation industry, with many facing job loss, relationship stress, and increased risk of anxiety and depression. With the likelihood of a slow recovery due to international restrictions, the residual and ongoing impacts upon the mental health of individuals will require careful consideration. Through increased mental health support, in addition to the already successful government support initiatives, we can look to maintain health and wellbeing among communities. By prioritising support for the most vulnerable we can also ensure that mental health services in rural and remote locations have access to essential psychiatric care.

Yours sincerely

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President

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