

INQUIRY INTO INTER-REGIONAL PUBLIC TRANSPORT

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Date Received: 21/03/2012



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ISSUE: AERIAL SERVICES TO WALGETT AND BREWARRINA (As at February 2012)

COMMERCIAL SERVICE – PREVIOUS SITUATION

The initiative of providing specialist services at a local level had assisted in the reduction of clients travelling away for further care and management of their health. However, when the need arises to travel to Dubbo for specialist appointments, the issue of scheduling a client consultation to link in with transport services that are available occur.

WAMS offer transport for their clients and also assist other health agencies to transport their clients, should seating be available. The Country link bus services added an earlier service during nominated days of the week to allow a return commute to Dubbo in a day.

Specialists on some occasions are known to arrive in Dubbo late in the afternoon, conduct surgery, and commence consultation late into the night. Situations have occurred when patients return to their home in Walgett midnight, or much later, due to the wildlife on the road. The main reasons which prevent a person from remaining overnight in Dubbo, and travelling on public transport the next day is the limited finances to afford these costs, or the family they have waiting at home who are in their care.

On the occasions when patients are hospitalised, discharges occur at all times of the day, any day of the week. This decision creates delays in sourcing transport to return to their home town. One could not begin to imagine the added stress this places on the recovery process of the individual, nor the stress of the family member who cannot always arrange immediate collection for someone three hundred kilometres plus, away from Walgett. The knowledge of friends and family suffering such an unfavourable experience has lead to some individuals not attending appointments which are scheduled in Dubbo, or other locations of equal or greater distances (e.g. Sydney).

CHARTERED SERVICE - CURRENT SITUATION

With the cessation of the regular commercial air service to Walgett in December 2008, WAMS instituted a regular charter service between Dubbo and Walgett twice each month to transport in locum doctors, allied health staff, midwives and other service providers servicing Walgett and WAMS such Magistrates, Non government agencies, Australian Hearing etc.

Initially the service ran at an approximate cost of \$450-00 per person per return trip which was comparable with the former commercial service charges. While the fortnightly services didn't cater for every health professionals coming to WAMS it did make regular three day visits possible as well as saving half a day travel time each way.

The current cost of the charter service (after the last price rise in September 2011) has risen to \$1, 2701-00 per return trip for the eight seat aircraft and \$1,970-00 for the four seat aircraft. This has increased WAMS overall expenses for operating the service to the point where a return trip is now costing approximately \$900-00 per person. If WAMS add the average Sydney-Dubbo -Sydney AIRLINK flight airfare onto the charter costs, it is resulting in WAMS paying something in the order of \$1,250-00 per person per trip.

The option of transporting health professional by car from Dubbo to Walgett is a minimum three hour trip each way which results in a minimum of six hours of lost production, for Brewarrina it is eight hours of lost production, which for a Doctor on \$166-00 per hour equates to \$1,000-00 of wasted time.

The RFDS service flies to Walgett most Thursday and returns midafternoon the following day. While WAMS does make use of this service, in most cases it does not allow the health practitioners sufficient time in Walgett and the surrounding townships, especially for those practitioners that also service Brewarrina and Bourke.

Other providers such as Royal Society for Deaf and Blind Children that currently use the WAMS charter service say it is not viable to send staff to service Walgett area for the two days that is offered by the RFDS service.

SCENARIO - REDUCING THE CURRENT SITUATION

- Reducing the current aerial charter arrangement will immediately reduce health personnel's service to clients
- Offering an increased road service from Dubbo to Walgett will reduce health personnel's service to clients

OPTIONS TO SUPPORT WAMS IN MAINTAINING THE CURRENT SITUATION

- Identify the current situation as a RED light in the Remote Service Delivery (RSD) Issues Tracker
- Identify the current situation under the RSD/LIP Health Building Block
- Identify the current situation in the briefing note to RSD Co-ordinator General, Mr. Brian Gleeson when he meets the members of the Walgett Gamilaraay Aboriginal Community Working Party (WGACWP) this month
- Identify the current situation to national and state health personnel, NACCHO – AHMRC – NSW Western LHD Partnership meeting

OPTIONS TO MAINTAIN PRACTITIONERS VISITS TO WALGETT AND BREWARRINA

- Request from all funding agencies that provided monies additional costs to cover the total travel costs for the visiting health personnel (e.g. NSW Rural Doctors Network. NSW Health, DoHA, etc)
 - Approach other commercial air services and offer that WAMS pay for seats on their planes (e.g. NSW Health, RFDS, etc)
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