

A safe system of work for the evacuation of patients with RFDS

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Greg McHugh has been Flight Nurse Manager for the Royal Flying Doctor Service-Central Operation, since 1997, with responsibilities including service delivery improvements, the maintenance of operational standards and management of the flight nurses in the Adelaide, Port Augusta and Alice Springs bases.

The Royal Flying Doctor Service—Central Operation is responsible for the provision of primary health care to parts of the remote areas of South Australia and the aeromedical evacuation services to South Australia and the Northern Territory, south of Elliot. RFDS Central Operations works collaboratively with the other RFDS sections to maintain the highest standard of safe service delivery possible.

Having worked with the RFDS (in two sections) for in excess of 15 years provides Greg some understanding of the challenges faced by care providers working in the rural and remote areas. As a registered nurse and midwife, and holding a Degree in Health Science (Management) and an Acute Care Nursing Certificate also allows him to focus on the clinical issues, while undertaking his managerial role in the improvement of safe service delivery within Central Operations.

Greg's previous experiences has also been in both clinical nursing and management in Sydney, as well as in rural and remote New South Wales.

Employers and employees are responsible to ensure that a safe system of work is used in the provision of a service. Increasingly we are seeing reports of organisations being prosecuted and fined substantial amounts for failing to meet their obligations to employees of providing a safe system of work. This extends to failures in situations where to the layman it may appear that the employer had minimal control or authority. No longer is it a defence to rely upon your previous track record of 'we have done it this way for years without incident therefore it is safe'.

The RFDS is in a position where we are entirely dependent on third-party support for the realisation of our service especially in the remote areas. This includes use of clinic or community vehicles for ground transport when evacuating patients from remote communities.

How do organisations such as RFDS meet their legal duty to manage risks to their employees in all of these varied and often unpredictable work situations whilst providing a timely and efficient emergency medical response?

A system has developed over time, including a risk assessment tool to guide managers and staff, and mechanisms to engage community partners in meeting the high standard of safety expected by the community

This paper will highlight these approaches and cover:

- the legal framework in which aeromedical organisations operate
- some of the elements of a safe system of work
- what this means for RFDS
- some risk assessment tools?
- a process for 'on the spot' risk assessment
- a safe system of work for employees irrespective of the vehicle use
- the RFDS Central Operations experience
- changing the culture
- the responsibilities of third-party organisations when providing the vehicle and driver
- mechanisms used in engaging community partners in the delivery of a safe system of work for all.

