



Hervey Bay on QLD's Fraser Coast is hardly 'remote' but despite having some great medical facilities, getting specialist care usually means a trip to Brisbane, just over 3 and a half hours away by car.

But one very clever local pharmacist **Mark McMurtrie** - who also happens to be a pilot - has come up with a great new service called **Community Flights**. We managed to catch up with Mark at the local [Daymans General Store](#) for a quick bite to find out more....

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TRANSCRIPT:

Brian & Kaye chat with Mark McMurtrie, founder of 'Community Flights'

INTRO - Brian:

Hervey Bay on Queensland's Fraser Coast is hardly remote, but despite having some great medical facilities, getting specialist care usually means a trip to Brisbane, just over three and a half hours away by car.

But one very clever local pharmacist, Mark McMurtrie, who also

VIDEO: All About Community Flights - Mark McMurtrie

Written by Brian Pickering & Kaye Browne with Mark McMurtrie

happens to be a pilot, has come up with a great new service called Community Flights.

We managed to catch up with Mark at the local Dayman's General Store for a quick bite to find out more...

KAYE:

What is Community Flights and how did it come about?

MARK:

Community Flights is the newest not for profit charity in the Fraser Coast.

I'm the founder and this was born from the frustrations I was having in the pharmacy.

I own River Heads Pharmacy and over the years I've come to learn of the stories of many of my patients struggling to reach medical appointments because we have such trouble attracting specialists to Harvey Bay and the Wide Bay area.

Many neurological, cardiologist & endocrinologist appointments and oncology patients with cancer have to travel to the Sunshine Coast or Brisbane for their treatments and their appointments.

So I actually ended up buying an aircraft a few years back... But it just so happens that the demand is outstripping the supply at the moment so I actually ended up phoning the hospital, and the co-ordinator of patient transport services let me know about just from this region, from Harvey Bay and Bundaberg, there's over 440 patients per month that have to travel to their appointment.

So it is quite staggering. And they're under a heavy load, they do an incredible job, but there's still many a frustration, and the fact of the matter is, even with COVID now as another layer of risk and hazard to the fact where patients who are immunocompromised having to travel on public transport.

So that's where I got to the point where after a few meetings I decided that I had the ability with the aircraft that I own here and I've got the skills and I can meet the criteria to provide this service, so in November of 2021 we founded Community Flights.

KAYE:

And are you up and running yet?

MARK:

Well at this stage we are very busy setting up in the background.

We've had many a meeting and we're putting policies and procedures together and we had planned to launch in April of 2022. So we're very close!

KAYE:

So who do you think are the main people that will need this and how do they get on your flight?

MARK:

Well after lots of research into the market and who's requiring this, with the massive demand that we found, we are going to have to triage and set aside criteria for the really needy that are requiring this.

And we've set up a request system that takes their details, and so the main people that we are trying to help are the patient's struggling financially and emotionally from traveling regularly to their appointments and also the immune compromised that can't access the current services available.

So there's many layers of this criteria that we're trying to really help those that are really struggling.

BRIAN:

You're essentially becoming an 'Uber Air' almost. Do you need to travel with doctors and nurses at all?

MARK:

We have had other doctors and nurses and ambulance officers come up to us and offer their services.

So we will have the ability to provide a carer for the patient if they do need someone to assist them if they don't already have a carer.

But under the legislative framework that we operate under, Air Services Australia are very strict about who I can carry, how many passengers etc etc, so at this stage, I can only transport for non-urgent medical treatments to and from their treatment destination and they cannot receive treatment on board the aircraft.

KAYE:

And the million dollar question everyone wants to know is how much is it going to cost them?

MARK:

Well the important thing out of this whole process is that we do not charge the patient or the carer on this flight, so it is free of charge for the patient and the carer.

KAYE:

That's awesome. How many flights a week are you hoping to do?

MARK:

Well we have plans that after launch we're expecting about three or four flights a week to start with, and I'm sure that the demand will meet us very quickly with that, so we have to be mindful of supply and demand at the moment.

VIDEO: All About Community Flights - Mark McMurtrie

Written by Brian Pickering & Kaye Browne with Mark McMurtrie

KAYE:

And you're not twins are you!!... but you do have other pilots as well, or you're going to be doing all the flights?

MARK:

To start with I am doing flights, yes. And it's in my own aircraft. We do have many pilots in the region through the aero clubs and our connections that are very willing to fly with us.

KAYE:

Awesome. So what can people do who are listening right now to help get you off the ground?

MARK:

We're really hoping there's three things we can look at doing... Firstly is creating awareness. Just by letting other people know that we exist so that they can either see if anyone can benefit from being a patient with us or seeing if they can support us in a certain way. So that's the second thing.

We're hoping to get some support and not just donations, but we are making partnerships with corporate groups and sponsorships. And the more the word that gets out, they can understand just what we're doing for the community and how they can help.

KAYE:

It's going to be handy if you could get a supplier of aviation fuel, perhaps as a sponsor.

MARK:

Yes, I've been in talks with some fuel suppliers as well. (laughs!)

KAYE:

This is an extraordinary thing!... so how can you fit this in and run a business and do all the other community things that you do?

MARK:

Sleep is for those that don't need it. (laughs!) ... so I'm just trying to time manage at the moment but you're right, it's very busy. We are working on weekends even with fundraising and having a little market stall, so I'm juggling time at the moment, but getting there!

KAYE:

Awesome. Mark thank you very much and we wish you every success

MARK:

Thank you.

FIND OUT MORE: <https://www.communityflights.org.au/>

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