

## **Grey nomads go unprepared by [Peter Lavelle](#)**

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Ever thought about retiring, buying a caravan or campervan and heading up north?

Every winter, thousands of older Australians hit the road for months at a time, escaping the colder months and following the sun.

They represent the fastest growing sector of the domestic tourist market, expanding at an annual rate of about 15 per cent. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, they inject \$2 billion into the Australian economy every year - a welcome boost to the economies of many regional towns.

But there's a downside. (And it's more than the fact that they drive slowly.)

Ms Gillian Humbert is a flight nurse with the Royal Flying Doctor Service based in Meekatharra in Western Australia. The RFDS frequently transports holidaymakers with urgent medical problems from remote areas.

She told the 8th National Rural Health Conference in Alice Springs last week that many grey nomads are responsible and seasoned travellers, well-prepared and knowledgeable about the pitfalls of outback travelling over long periods.

But some haven't a clue, she said.

Many, especially first time travellers, don't realise there aren't the same health services and facilities they find in the cities. In this age group, they'll often have a chronic illness or a disability that they haven't planned ahead for. This makes them more vulnerable than younger, healthier travellers.

They often neglect to bring their regular medications, said Ms Humbert. They may just bring repeat prescriptions - or they may not even have these, assuming they'll be able to see a doctor and/or get their prescriptions filled. But when they need their medications, a pharmacist or doctor may not be accessible.

Relying on local pharmacies to dispense medications depletes those pharmacies' stocks, leaving shortages that hurt the local communities, she said. And if travellers have an accident or become ill in a remote area - which can even happen to healthy people - they're in a much more vulnerable position if they're aged, or have a chronic illness or a disability. They're more likely to need emergency transport, and/or hospital facilities - services that are already overstretched serving local populations.

### **Be prepared**

If you're thinking about planning a long trip in outback Australia, you need to be thoroughly prepared, warned Ms Humbert. You should:

- make sure you have enough medications for the trip;
- know where you're going and what sort of medical services (GPs, pharmacies and hospitals) there are along the way, in case you become ill;
- take a letter from your doctor and a list of medications so that if you run into trouble, local medical services have enough information to treat you;
- take a first aid kit with bandages, plasters, antiseptic cream, and a broad spectrum antibiotic;
- make sure you have a reliable vehicle that's been recently serviced, with a spare tyre;
- take up-to-date maps;
- take plenty of water and fuel, bearing in mind that in some parts of Australia there are no petrol stations for thousands of miles;
- tell someone where you're going - friends, family, or the police - so if you don't arrive at the appointed time, a search can be made (remember to notify them when you arrive safely);

- in many parts of the outback mobile phone coverage is very poor. So you should take a high frequency two-way radio tuned to the frequency of the nearest RFDS base (they can be bought from most two-way communications centres or hired from RFDS bases). Alternatively, take a satellite phone.

That way, the trip won't be your last.

### More info

- Australian Health Map - state by state guide <http://www.abc.net.au/health/healthmap/default.htm>
- Flying Doctors - Health Matters feature  
<http://www.abc.net.au/health/healthmap/features/flyingdoctors.htm>
- Country life: a health hazard? - Health Matters feature  
<http://www.abc.net.au/health/regions/features/countrylife/default.htm>
- 8th National Rural Health Conference - ABC Rural coverage <http://abc.net.au/rural/events/ruralhealth/>
- Outback travel safety, from the Royal Flying Doctor Service <http://www.flyingdoctor.net/travelinfo.htm>

From the Flying Doctors site <http://www.flyingdoctor.net/travelinfo.htm>

*"It is surprising how many emergency calls we get from people unprepared for the rigours of outback travel. It is hard to imagine how vast the Outback is, and how easily emergencies can happen, until it is too late." **Chief Medical Officer, Dr Bruce Sanderson (South Eastern Section)***