

THE FLYING DOCTOR

Susan Downes has made up for her late entry into medicine by pursuing a career as a GP for women in remote communities.

STORY + PHOTOS NATHAN DYER

It's late afternoon at Perth's Jandakot airport and a row of Pilatus PC-12 aircraft stand in waiting, the famous RFDS acronym gilded gold as their tails catch the warm light of the fast sinking sun. Nearby, outback GP and budding pilot Susan Downes looks skyward as a small Cessna roars into flight. "I just love the sound of small planes," she says, leaning on the wing of a two-seater light aircraft.

A hundred metres away, inside the Royal Flying Doctor Service's western operations control room, a screen blinks with the coordinates of six aircraft in flight across Western Australia. A map on the wall shows the vast scope of the organisation's western operations: 15 aircraft at five bases, connecting communities from Kalumburu to Esperance, across 2.5 million square kilometres.

Although the control room is full of activity, for Susan the real action occurs far away from here. "I'd rather be in a dusty clinic," says the 65-year-old, referring to the raucous waiting room of her Jigalong women's clinic, plonked on the red dirt of the Little Sandy Desert, 100km east of Newman. "I've been going there for almost 15 years now and I love every aspect of it." Susan revels in her role as GP for a clinic full of women – many of them pregnant – and smiling children. "I love the women, I love the heat, and I love the excitement and the fact that you've got to improvise," she says.

It's a far cry from the city career she once endured in Perth's big hospitals. "Most of my colleagues thought I was mad," says Susan, recalling her first foray into the desert. "They'd say, 'Why are you putting yourself in all that dust and muck, and you never know where you'll be

sleeping?'," she recalls. "But when you go where someone's been speared as payback, you start to understand the cultural aspect of medicine. To be able to do surgery, and what I call 'real' medicine, out in remote places where you have to think on your feet – that gives me a buzz."

Along with regular stints delivering babies at Derby Hospital, in the west Kimberley, Susan spends one week a month with the Martu women of the eastern Pilbara visiting the communities of Jigalong, Parnngurr, Kunawarritji and Punmu as a doctor with the RFDS Rural Women's GP Service. Initially, Susan was faced with a steep learning curve. "I'd get to those communities and there would be no-one there, so I'd ask where they were and someone would say, 'They're out goanna hunting'," she recalls. "So I'd go out goanna hunting, then we'd come back, cook the goannas and sit around the fire and I'd ask, 'Who's going to come to the clinic?'. I'd end up doing some sort of cobbled together clinic at 9pm at night." Thankfully, things have changed. "Over the years I've grown to know those families and become part of their families, and the girls and women now come to me not because they're on a pap smear list, or whatever; they come to me because they want to talk to me about myriad health issues."

Jigalong's resident physician, Dr Randolph Spargo, remembers the first time Susan arrived at the remote clinic. "She rose to the occasion very, very quickly, and over the years she's established fantastic relationships with the female population," he says. "They line up when she arrives. And mothers bring their daughters along."

Having lived in Jigalong for 18 years, Dr Spargo

Dr Susan Downes revels in her remote GP role with the RFDS Rural Women's GP Service.





*Susan is ready for take-off to a women's clinic at Jigalong, armed with a portable ultrasound machine.
OPPOSITE: Young Susan (left) on her uncle Athol's Narrogin farm with baby cousin Grant (on sheep) and brother Gregory.*



says Susan's ability to build those relationships has had a profound impact on local women's health. "Because, after all, it's not how skilled you are as a doctor, but in primary care it's what you know about that patient."

Today, however, unseasonal rains have flooded access to Susan's beloved desert clinic, leaving her grounded in Perth. Standing in an RFDS hangar beside one of the organisation's red-bellied PC-12s, she reflects on the lifelong journey that's led her to practise medicine in some of Australia's most remote communities.

Growing up in the Perth suburb of Mount Pleasant, Susan's childhood was full of exploration. With family spread from Geraldton to Albany, most holidays were spent on farms at Geraldton, Narrogin and Boyanup. It was during those formative years that Susan became interested in anatomy. "Especially at Narrogin with my uncle Athol," she says. "They killed sheep for meat and he'd show me all the anatomy of the sheep. And down at my uncle Jack's farm at Boyanup they had a dairy stud; the vet would come out for a tricky delivery of a calf and I used to help out."

With a love of the bush and animals, and a boyfriend, Arnie, who wanted to be a farmer, Susan set about becoming a big animal vet after leaving school. After passing her

first-year science classes at the University of Western Australia she applied for a veterinary place at a Melbourne university. "They asked if I was going to have children and I said yes. They said, 'Well, how can you be a vet and have children, be a mother?'" Consequently, she wasn't offered a place.

Arnie went to war in Vietnam and returned home, but was killed in a car crash driving back to his Victorian home after visiting Susan in Perth for his 24th birthday. After a period of deep depression, Susan graduated with honours from science with a major in botany and took a job with the Agriculture Department at the WA Herbarium. Years later, during a research trip to England to study prototype specimens at the Kew Gardens and Cambridge University herbaria, Susan met schoolteacher and widower Ray Downes. In 1973 she moved to England, married Ray, who already had a young son, Jason, and settled in West Cumbria, where Ray taught and Susan tutored at the local technical college and later worked as a research officer for The Medical Research Council Epidemiology Unit.

At age 36, with sons Robin and Matthew aged 12 and 5, and stepson Jason, 17, Susan decided to apply for medical school. She wrote to universities in Australia and the UK. Nottingham University was the only



one to show interest. Certain that she'd underwhelmed the entrance interview panel, she returned home and waited for the bad news. Four days later, a letter arrived with an unconditional offer. "I was exhilarated and frightened all at the same time," she says. "It was like a wish come true, but once you've got it, what are you going to do with it."

Susan spent the next six years raising a family and completing her medical degree, graduating with first-class honours aged 42 – the oldest woman to graduate from a UK medical school at the time. "I'd be sitting in lectures trying to concentrate and I'd think, 'Oh my God, there's not enough toilet paper' or 'I didn't take dinner out of the freezer'," she laughs, recalling those long years of study.

After slogging it out for a year as a junior doctor in the UK medical system, Ray was offered a redundancy and the family moved to Western Australia. There Susan worked at Fremantle Hospital, and later the King Edward Memorial Hospital and Woodside Maternity Hospital. She continued to study and was awarded the Fellowship of General Practice, and specialised in obstetrics and gynaecology.

Around 2001, with her youngest son aged 16, Susan began regularly heading bush,

working with the RFDS Rural Women's GP Service (RWGPS) to visit Australia's Indian Ocean Territories of Christmas and Cocos islands, as well as remote communities throughout Western Australia, and doing obstetric locum work in the Northern Territory and Queensland.

From the outset, Susan embraced the opportunities to return to the bush and the remote work. "I absolutely loved it," she says. "I remember thinking to myself, 'I'm flying over the Pilbara desert; people pay thousands to do this, and I'm getting paid to do it'."

Manager of the RFDS Rural Women's GP Program in Western Australia, Maureen Robertson says Susan's passion and ability to deal with adversity sets her apart. "There's always a solution for her," says Maureen, who coordinates 17 female doctors visiting 26 communities through the RWGPS, a program set up to send doctors to communities without a regular female GP. "And because she's so passionate, and so willing, and so generous-hearted, she manages to get places and do things that other people would not even come close to, because there's never a barrier to her. Susan can always find her way around problems."



A doctor with the RFDS, Susan Downes is soon to be a pilot herself. OPPOSITE: Susan uses a portable ultrasound to treat a patient at Kunawarritji, in the eastern Pilbara.



Susan waits for a flight at Punmu community's 'Qantas Club', in the eastern Pilbara.

In October 2011, a few days after her 62nd birthday, Susan experienced a life-changing medical shock following a routine mammogram. The results came through by fax while she was in the middle of her Parnngurr clinic: cancer. "It was surreal, like a bad dream," Susan says. But it wasn't until the following week that she told anyone. Colleagues at Derby convinced her to look into treatment and eventually she had surgery that involved a mastectomy and the rebuilding of her left breast. "I've got an 87 percent chance of still being cancer-free in five years, and 10 per cent of dying of something else, so I've got good odds," she says, smiling.

Susan says experiencing cancer taught her a lot about herself. "It taught me not to have to think of somebody else first, all the time," she says. "And, as a doctor, it has changed me. I know what patients go through now, what you feel like when you've had multiple anaesthetics, what you're frightened of, what you're thinking. It makes me much more empathetic and a better doctor, I'm sure."

Three-and-a-half years on, Susan admits she's started cutting back on her hectic work schedule,

which previously included a two-weeks-on, two-weeks-off schedule at Derby Hospital, monthly visits to the eastern Pilbara, and regular visits to the Northern Territory, Queensland and Indian Ocean Territories. She's now focused on one week a month at Derby and one week a month in the desert.

There's also another love. After a lifetime dedicated to helping others, Susan is only weeks away from gaining her private pilot's licence. "I've always wanted to fly," she says. She admits this achievement is all about herself, adding that she hopes to begin flying to some of her remote clinics, but mainly to visit friends and family scattered across the state, including grandchildren Jarrah, 4, Willow, 2, and baby Manning.

Despite the reduced workload, Susan is adamant that retirement is not on her horizon. "I don't want to retire because I love what I do," she says. "I adore obstetrics and never, ever is any delivery the same. It's exhilarating and exciting every time. Sometimes I'm crying with joy – I can't help it, it's just an overwhelmingly beautiful experience – and you never take it for granted."