

Sunraysia Information & Referral Service Inc. (SIRS Inc.) is run solely by volunteers with no paid staff and has been operating in the Mildura area since 1972. Previously called Sunraysia Citizens Advice Bureau.

In 1999 the Mallee Division of General Practice (MDGP) set up a fund to enable those patients having financial difficulty to access treatment needed and not available locally.

SIRS was asked to operate this fund in 1999 and has been offering upfront payments for flights and/or fuel for the Sunraysia community ever since.

SIRS assist up to 1000 patients (plus their escorts) per year to access medical treatment not available locally.

SIRS works under the Victorian Patient Transport Assistance Scheme (VPTAS) criteria and this scheme enables patients who live more than 100kms from their Specialist to claim the cost of travel be that airfares or fuel and also \$49.50 per person, per night towards their accommodation.

SIRS relies solely on donations from the community to operate as SIRS does not qualify for any Government funding, Local, State or Federal. We used to obtain some funding from local council but the criteria changed and we no longer qualify. Because the money we pay for airfares is reimbursed by the VPTAS Scheme (State Government) we do not qualify for Tax Deduction Status and therefore cannot apply for philanthropic funds. SIRS relies solely on donations from the public to keep operating to pay rent, phone, power, water and incidentals.

We are fortunate that members of the public have donated considerably to our service or we could not operate.

With help from the local Travel Agent (helloworld) we were able to negotiate a contract with REX Airlines for a 40% deduction on cost of flights we book. This is now 30%.

This contract has been in place for nearly 10 years and SIRS spends around \$1,000,000 per financial year on flights only and then we offer petrol money to those who prefer to drive or at the moment have no choice but to drive if their appointment is in Adelaide.

SIRS has patients from all walks of life asking for assistance to attend their appointments. The cost of living crisis at the moment has seen working people ask for help as the reimbursement of funds from VPTAS if you pay yourself was recently pushed out to 15 weeks. This is a cost that cannot be sustained if you need to travel for fortnightly treatments. During that time SIRS was owed upwards \$250,000.00. VPTAS has caught up now and reimbursements are around five to six weeks.

The cost of airfares for the ordinary person is way out of their reach particularly as I said if they need to travel more than once or twice.

The fact that the planes are very often cancelled or delayed only adds to the stress patients are feeling and this often happens at Mildura airport with both REX and Qantas. Particularly in January and February. This means that patients will not make their appointments in Melbourne that they sometimes have waited six to twelve months for and now have a mad scramble to try to change their appointment. This can sometimes happen but if not then they are waiting further for the appointment.

We know there are patients who would not seek medical help because of the cost of flights and that is exactly why the MDGP set up this fund. SIRS administering this fund are very much needed in our community and this is shown by the number of patients we assist. So far this financial year SIRS has assisted nearly 600 patients. At the moment the cheapest flight costs \$409.00 for one person return to Melbourne.

Some patients have not ever been out of the district and the thought of going to Melbourne or Adelaide adds very much to the stress of being unwell. Then you add in the prohibitive cost of flights and the possibility of their flight being cancelled at short notice.

Also these patients are mostly older people on Pensions and the reimbursement from VPTAS takes up to six weeks reducing the amount of funds they have to cover their living expenses for that time.