



The 'not so royal' flying doctor

Dr Dave Baldwin, New Zealand's flying doctor, believes he has the best job in the world. It combines the three passions in his life: medicine, flying and family.

In 1991, Dave established the flying doctor service, based at Bulls, a small town in New Zealand's North Island. He named it the Bulls Flying Doctor Service. Now operating out of nearby Palmerston North Airport, Dave's only staff includes himself, son Marc, and daughter Niki.

Dave, now 47, was brought up in a little fishing village in Wellington, attended Massey University straight out of high school, but dropped out to join the workforce. "I wasn't really interested in school," he acknowledges. "I did some roof-tiling, deer hunting, and van and truck driving."

But unfulfilled and seeking a challenge, he returned to uni to complete a science degree, which he did with excellent results. "Students would say,

'Gee, Dave, you sure you're not applying for anything?'" he laughs. "To shut them up, I'd say, 'Yeah, I'm going to be a bloody doctor!'"

Initially meant as a joke, Dave began thinking seriously about a career in medicine. He completed his medical degree with the dream of opening a general practice, but joined the Air Force as a doctor. Based at Ohakea, just outside Palmerston North, he serviced the RNZAF strike squadron where he gained invaluable experience relevant to both medicine and flying.

"I got my commercial licence when I was in the Air Force," he says. "Then I started doing some commercial courier work with one of the local freight companies, which gave me instrument flying experience." After three years in the Air Force, Dave decided it was time for a change. "I wasn't really a military person as such," he says. "I'm more of a free spirit." He then bought a small general practice in Bulls, and developed it, along with his goal of establishing a flying doctor service.

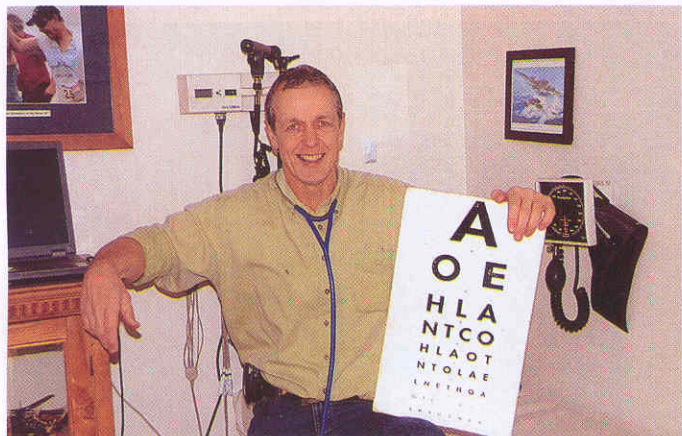
The Dream

Second eldest amongst four children, Dave insists his love for flying and adventure runs in his blood. "My father was in the Air Force as an instrument technician," he explains. "Rather than coming to watch us play sport, we'd sit down and listen to him telling us stories. And my mother's always been an outdoorsy, adventurous sort of person."

Dave was eager to incorporate his passion for flying with his love of medicine. The idea of providing an aviation service to pilots at remote airstrips prompted Dave into action. He bought a new plane, and to attract customers to his new business, used his deer hunting contacts in the South Island, where he provided medical services to those in remote areas.

Dave then began working with Dave Saxton, whom he describes as, "one of the legendary helicopter pilots." "I started doing a few of the pilot medicals down there (South Island), and Dave and I started getting serious about the idea of

ABOVE: Dr Dave's "Palmerston North Aerospace Research Centre"



establishing a flying doctor service," he says. "When I did a presentation to the Australian Aerospace Association, I called it the 'not so royal' Bulls Flying Doctor Service." Looking to Dave Saxton as a mentor, and after much discussion, the decision was made to establish the 'not so royal' Bulls Flying Doctor Service.

Operating in a monthly cycle, Dave finds himself meeting with pilots at what he calls his Palmerston North Aerospace Research Centre on the first Tuesday of each month. "It's my aviation centre, and it's a purpose-built hangar with offices, and pilots either drive to me or fly," he says.

He uses a Cessna 172XP Hawk for his work, and considers it to be perfect for the job, getting him safely to each destination. "It's powerful, and has 40 degrees of flap, so it will land on a postage stamp," he explains. "It's got the power to get me out of trouble - getting into altitude if need be through clouds and through turbulence. It's also got long-range tanks, so I only need to fill up once per trip." Despite being an experienced pilot with over 3000 hours in his logbook, Dave believes he's still learning in the flying department.

The first week of each month Dave flies out to examine pilots in the South of the South Island, including Mount Cook, and the West Coast. The second week sees him covering the whole of the East Coast of the North Island, while during the third week he visits pilots in the North of the South Island.

Flying only once or twice a week, the other days of the week are spent planning trips and sorting paperwork, and of course, dealing with patients at his Bulls general practice. This structured system enables the business to run well. "It's

about going to the pilots' territory and keeping to standards," he says. "It beats them having to drive a few days to see some doctor in the city."

Jumping the hurdles

In pursuing his dream, many doubted the viability of a flying doctor service. But Dave kept the dream alive. "People didn't think I could make a living out of it - because it was rural. Most of those skeptics are general practitioners now."

Determined to prove everyone wrong, Dave took relief in a conversation he had with Dr Wilkins, at the time head of CASA's medical department. "He came up and said, 'Dave, we've got the same issues in Australia - a reduction of rural GPs, and there's a lot of peripheral pilots way out in remote areas such as the Northern Territory. We should be doing this.'"

For Dave, the key business philosophy was servicing the pilots and, according to him, the Australians were enthusiastic, and keen to support his idea.

Faced with the same challenges as most when establishing a new business, Dave initially found finance a major hurdle. "Making a huge investment to run a flying doctor service like this was risky to start with," he admits. He entered a "grey-zone" period where the business was at its most fragile. "You're not putting as much effort into the medical centre because there are only so many hours in a day," he explains. "You're developing a service that may not work, and if you get sick, it will all collapse."

With the flying doctor service now at a manageable stage, Dave is still grateful for the flexibility shown by the pilots he services. "There are often some centres I can't get to either for the weather, or whatever reason,"

ABOVE: Flying in challenging conditions is all part of the flying doctor gig.

ABOVE LEFT: Dave Baldwin started his business 15 years ago.

he says. "So, some of the pilots will drive or fly, and meet me someplace else."

Looking ahead

The Bulls Flying Doctor Service has clearly taken off and Dave continues to plan for the future. Along with his desire to move into research, Dave is looking at strengthening his links with the Australian Aviation Society. His time spent lecturing via web cast for Massey University has also given him the idea of developing a hypoxia program in the very near future.

"It's a privilege to be a doctor. What I do is a bloody gift," he says. "Most people don't follow their passion, they just sit on their fat butts, and the big highlight of the week is a sporting event."

Dave is quick to point out the important role the service plays in bringing together friends, professional colleagues, and most importantly, family. With Marc accompanying him on trips, and managing the hangar, and Niki taking care of matters in the office, the Bulls Flying Doctor service is a real family affair.

"I've got my family working with me, not for me," he confirms. "When I get up at 4am, the whole family gets up. My wife sorts our gear, and makes us breakfast, lunch - the whole three days' food. My son pre-flights the aeroplane, my daughter sorts out a bit of computer work, and we disappear into the sunrise."

No wonder he says he has the best job in the world.

By Banita Dimitrioska