

Charity initiative takes off in Southland-Otago

Che Baker

Southland and Otago residents suffering from a medical condition and in need of assistance to attend medical appointments can now call on an air angel.

Angel Flight is a charity that provides flights for patients that need non-urgent medical treatment where road travel could be physically or emotionally demanding.

It started in New Zealand in May last year after retired businessman Lance Weller saw the need for a service for people who could not afford to pay for commercial flights but required them.

He had flown missions for a similar charity in Australia.

Flights are undertaken by private pilots, and more than 200 aircraft owners and volunteers are already involved.

This week he announced operations had expanded to Southland and Otago with the inclusion of a Wanaka and Queenstown based pilots.

Wanaka Flight Training owner and Angel Flight pilot Peter Hendriks said he and his wife, Julie, got involved in the charity as a way to give back to the community that supported them.

Families who had a sick family member could struggle to balance appointments and “there is enough stress going on for the families as it is”.

They provided the service to relieve some of that stress and that of having to travel long distances to attend specialist appointments, check-ups or medical treatments such as chemotherapy, he said.

In Queenstown, Angel Flight pilot Hugh McLellan said he had read about the initiative, thought it was a great idea and made contact with organisers.

‘Flying is a specialist skill, and I have 2000 accumulated hours in a fixed wing craft, with a lot of that time being clocked in over the West Coast,’ Mr McLellan said.

“There’s maybe only a handful of pilots with those kind of hours and that accumulated knowledge of the area around, and its a good thing to use that knowledge and experience for a great cause.”

To qualify, registered health professionals, such as practitioners, nurses or social workers needed to refer “mission requests”.

Earth Angels meet every flight and provided transport to and from the airport to medical

appointments.

Earth Angel Philippa Lumsden said the charity's first mission involved transferring from Kaitaia to Auckland a 14-day-old baby who could not feed to receive treatment for a cleft palate.

More information: angelflightnz.co.nz



Ready to help: Queenstown pilot Hugh McLellan with his plane he will pilot for the charity Angel Flights, which offers free flights and transfers to non-urgent hospital appointments. Photo: GRANT BRYANT/FAIRFAX NZ 628676213



Angel wings: Angel Flight pilot Peter Hendriks and Earth Angels Julie Hendriks and Philippa Lumsden are looking for families in need of their services in the Upper Clutha. Photo: CHE BAKER/FAIRFAX NZ 628678387

With grateful thanaks to The Southland Times, November 27, 2013