Queensland Health has paid tribute to its unique flying specialist service fifty years after it first took to the skies.

Queensland Health’s Director General Policy Planning and Resourcing Professor Andrew Wilson said so many people’s lives had been touched by the flying specialists.

The Flying Surgeon Services began in Longreach in June 1959. The service provided specialist surgical facilities to about 21 towns in Western Queensland in a Cessna 182 high wing piloted under contract by Bush Pilots Airways. A second service began out of Roma in 1980, which was expanded on July 4, 1988, to include the specialised Flying Obstetric and Gynaecology Service, also based out of Roma. The Longreach service moved to Mt Isa in 2001 before ceasing in 2007. Professor Wilson said Queensland Health was looking to make the service even more relevant to people living in the vast remote areas of the state.

“There have been changes in medicine and in the population’s health needs around Queensland that would have been impossible to imagine when the service first started 50 years ago,” Professor Wilson said. “We’re as committed as ever to an aerial medical system to meet the health needs of all Queenslanders. “A Rural and Remote Specialist Outreach Services Project Steering Committee has been established to look at the best, most sustainable and most cost effective ways of delivering flying specialist services, maternity services and outreach specialist services.”

Professor Wilson said there was much to celebrate with the 50th anniversary. “The service has employed some outstanding flying doctors and specialists who will always be remembered by the people of rural and remote Queensland they served,” he said.

In particular, some significant figures in the flying surgeon service would include the first flying surgeon Dr Christopher Cummins (Longreach 1959-1964), anaesthetist Dr Walter Biggs (Longreach 1960-1965), surgeon Dr Donald Leaming (Longreach 1964-1969), anaesthetist Dr Graham Smith (Longreach 1965-1969), surgeon Dr Tony Paul (Longreach 1969-1980, Roma 1980-1998), and surgeon Dr Russell Bennett (Roma 1998-present) to name just a few.

“Naturally there are others,” said Professor Wilson, “including the all important nursing staff and other clinical staff.”

Current surgeon Dr Russell Bennett said the service had changed immeasurably since he joined in 1998. “The major change is the shift away from emergency surgery. These days most of the surgery we perform is elective,” he said. “People still have the image of us operating on a kitchen table in the middle of nowhere. All of the surgeries I do are performed in an operating theatre at a hospital.”

Despite being in his 60s, Dr Bennett said his time with the service is far from over. “It is a hugely fulfilling job. I plan to be here for at least another four or five years,” he said. Dr Bennett said the Flying Surgeon Service is still an incredibly important and relevant part of the health system. “The service is like a pressure valve for a lot of rural hospitals who are flat out,” he said. “If we weren’t operating, people would have to travel huge distances to get to hospitals which may already be running near capacity.”