

Medical deliveries by drone ready for take-off in Australia

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Medical deliveries by drone will soon help people in remote areas. Photo: Odd Andersen/AFP via Getty Images

Medical deliveries by drone are ready for take-off in Australia. Regional patients should begin receiving medicines in May. Drones are small, unmanned aircraft.

The new service will be provided by Swoop Aero in partnership with pharmacy group TerryWhite Chemmart. Swoop Aero's first deliveries will be out of a pharmacy in Goondiwindi, in the south of Queensland. Drones will be used to deliver medicines to customers within a 130 kilometre range of the town. This will save the area's residents trips of up to three hours to visit the pharmacy.

The drones contain a secure chilled container, where pharmacists put in the medicines. They will be flown by a pilot based in Melbourne. The drones will deliver the medicines to customers who will scan a QR code to open the drone when it arrives.

The pilot can fly up to five drones at a time. Swoop Aero has been working with the Civil Aviation Safety Authority for over a year to finalise approvals for the flights. The Civil Aviation Safety Authority is a government body that regulates Australian aviation safety.

Making Medicine More Accessible

Pharmacist Lucy Walker owns the TerryWhite Chemmart store in Goondiwindi. Walker said there was definitely a need for the service in the region. "One of the big barriers to health care in rural areas is access," she said, and drones are a good way of covering long distances.

Walker said patients have become more comfortable using telehealth services. Telehealth is when a patient talks to doctors by video link or phone, instead of going to the clinic. However, people still had to travel to pick up their medication from the pharmacy. "Having that ability now, if they are not well or if they have a sick child at home, to deliver medication to them will be great," Walker said.

Each drone can carry up to 3 kilograms in cold storage. "If we are doing a flu vaccination clinic and we run out of stock, we could get the drone to deliver more," Walker said.

Melbourne-based Swoop Aero was launched in 2017. So far, it has been using drones to deliver medical supplies in the African nations of Malawi, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Mozambique.

Drones Can Survive Mid-Air Collisions

Founder Eric Peck said Swoop Aero had been looking for the right partners and opportunity to use its technology in Australia. "Right from the early days we knew there was a lot of demand for this," he said. "This is something quite new for Australia. It's really exciting."

The initial drone deliveries were paid for by a company called Symbion, which is Australia's largest health care wholesaler. Over time, Peck said, customers would pay for the deliveries themselves, but they wouldn't be expensive. He expects they would be similarly priced to a courier service. A courier service is a private company that delivers important letters and parcels.

Peck said the drones had been through many trials to make sure they could fly safely. They can reach speeds of 115 kilometres an hour and withstand high winds and heavy rain, for example. The drones are also built to survive mid-air collisions.

If a drone hit something it would be "highly unlikely" that it would fall from the sky, Peck said. "If something really goes wrong, it can go into an emergency landing mode where it will look for a safe place to land."

Quiz

- 1 Which of the following MOST influenced Swoop Aero's decision to use drones?
 - (A) You can make more money from medical deliveries using drones.
 - (B) Drones are much cheaper to use than most people think.
 - (C) Drones can fly through the air and save customers time.
 - (D) The Civil Aviation Safety Authority recommended using drones.

- 2 Why is Eric Peck excited?
 - (A) He has always wanted to go on a trip to Australia.
 - (B) He is planning to sell his company to Lucy Walker.
 - (C) He made lots of money from his service in Africa.
 - (D) There is a lot of demand for his service in Australia.

- 3 What is the author's purpose for writing this article?
 - (A) to convince the reader to invest money in Swoop Aero
 - (B) to inform the reader about a new way to deliver medicines to rural areas
 - (C) to make a prediction that Swoop Aero will not be successful
 - (D) to explain how Swoop Aero and pharmacy owners disagree

- 4 Based on the article, what is the MOST likely reason the author includes the perspective of Lucy Walker?
 - (A) to show how pharmacy owners are supportive of using drones to deliver medicines
 - (B) to show how pharmacy owners are worried that drones are too dangerous
 - (C) to show that the owners of Swoop Aero disagree on how to run their company
 - (D) to show why Swoop Aero decided to bring their company to Australia