

# Bumper season cannot hide farming's dark side

Paddocks flush with feed and promise of a decent harvest cannot hide the fact our farmers pay an unnecessary and at times tragic price in terms of illness, injury and farm fatality.

Good years might sort out the overdraft but won't alter the fact farmers will not live as long, or as healthily, as people in cities.

Unless rural and regional areas take major, and immediate, steps to improve the physical, mental and social wellbeing of their communities, they will continue to pay a price that is simply too high.

Deakin University School of Medicine, in partnership with the National Centre for Farmer Health (NCFH), is offering an essential opportunity to boost understanding of the health issues faced by farmers, agricultural workers and their families.

Agricultural Health and Medicine Unit (HMF701) chair, Dr Scott McCoombe, says farming and rural communities have as much trouble coming to grips with these challenges as does the wider professional health industry including social workers, doctors, nurses, allied health professionals, veterinarians and other agri-professionals.

Dr McCoombe says. "Looking after our farmers and agricultural workers makes everyone a winner. Healthier, happier farming communities, being cared for by support services with a much deeper awareness of the unique health issues we encounter, is essential for a productive and sustainable ag industry" he says.

"The information which will be delivered through HMF701 will be beneficial to professionals looking to improve their agribusiness or to improve health provision, research, policy and literacy in rural and remote communities".

"Just as importantly, the course aims to develop the next generation of rural and agricultural health leaders to support, sustain and improve the lot of rural and remote Australians."

NCFH director, Clinical Associate Professor Sue Brumby, says compounding the challenge for farming families is the well-documented shortage of health professionals in rural Australia.

Ms Brumby says the diversity of health issues in rural and agricultural communities make it unsurprising farmers experience poor health outcomes and shorter life spans than their urban counterparts.

“The training unit we are offering will help address the drought of agricultural health knowledge and improve service delivery for farming communities,” Ms Brumby says.

“The Agricultural Health and Medicine unit was offered for the first time earlier this year as a five-day intensive curriculum and proved an incredibly successful and rewarding course for everyone who took part,” she says.

“The inaugural class couldn’t speak highly enough of their experiences in Hamilton, and come February 28<sup>th</sup> 2011, we look forward to welcoming the next batch of agricultural professionals and rural health leaders to Western District Health Service in Hamilton” Associate Professor Brumby said.

NCFH lecturer Dr Scott McCoombe says he hopes the course attracts a broad range of postgraduate students and says “rural professionals and graduates with a relevant health degree will be eligible to become an AgriSafe provider”.

Dr McCoombe says the five-day intensive curriculum will cover the following topics:

- Agricultural medicine conditions and co-morbidities
- High risk remote populations and chronic disease
- Rural respiratory health
- Climate impacts on farmer health
- Vision and hearing injuries
- Cancer in agriculture
- Traumatic agricultural injury
- Remote emergency medicine
- Addiction, suicide and mental illness in rural Australia
- Pesticide and veterinary chemical hazards
- Musculoskeletal health and ageing
- Zoonotic diseases

“If we can continue increasing the health education of rural professionals, we will undoubtedly continue to close the current rural-urban health gap.”

For further information on the February unit, or scholarships, please contact the National Centre for Farmer Health on (03) 5551 8533 or [ncfh@wdhs.net.au](mailto:ncfh@wdhs.net.au)