

Healthy farms need healthy farmers

The health of a farm business can be very much tied to personal health and wellbeing, so when a survey found the health of country people falling behind, a program was launched to turn this around. It is reporting some heartening results

BY MELISSA MARINO

■ Data from the first groups of people to complete the three-year Sustainable Farm Families program shows substantial improvements in health, including reductions in levels of cholesterol, blood sugar and body mass index (BMI), and better reported farm safety incidents.

The nationwide program now involves more than 430 families in 24 groups across all rural industries, but among the first to take part three years ago were 128 broadacre farmers from five regions in Victoria and South Australia.

Their results are not only revealing, but have helped to shape the direction and priorities of the program in years to come.

In its first year, the program found the broadacre farmers had higher BMI and cholesterol and were more likely to drink alcohol at high-risk levels than the general population or those in other rural industries.

But the findings have also shown that health outcomes for participants improved almost immediately after starting the program.

In the first year, 43 per cent of men and 38 per cent of women had elevated cholesterol levels, but this had dropped to 14 per cent and 18 per cent by year three. Almost three-quarters of men had an elevated BMI when they started the program, but this had dropped to 38 per cent by the third year. Smaller reductions over the three years were seen in men and women who drank at high-risk levels once a month, prompting organisers to target the area in future programs.

In Victoria, Susan Brumby, the program's principal investigator and community service director of the Western District Health Service (WDHS), says the positive health outcomes are partly due to the requirement that participants take control, devising their own strategies to address their health and safety.

The program, co-run by WDHS principal researcher and men's health educator Stu Willder, has also helped farmers to see that their health and safety is a key factor in their financial bottom line, Ms Brumby says. "If you value your health and realise how important it is to you, your farm and your family, then your attitudes about farm health and safety will naturally improve because it puts it into context."

The program is led by the WDHS in Hamilton, Victoria, and funded by the Joint Venture on Farm Health and Safety, partnered by several RDCs including the GRDC and managed by the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation (RIRDC). Other partners include RMIT Hamilton, Farm Management 500, Land Connect Australia, the Victorian Farmers Federation and Australian Women in Agriculture.

Ms Brumby says muscular injuries and respiratory diseases have emerged as common ailments among participants. There are also significant issues concerning mental health.

Participants showed no greater occurrence of mental health problems such as depression, stress and anxiety than their urban counterparts, but they had fewer options for help and were less likely to seek it. The Sustainable Farm Families program has



Susan Brumby, principal investigator with the Sustainable Farm Families program: health and safety are key factors in the financial bottom line. PHOTO: MELISSA MARINO

SUSTAINABLE FARM FAMILIES STATISTICS

	Drink alcohol at least once a week (%)	Drink at high-risk levels* at least once a month (%)	Waist measurement above 88cm (%)	Elevated fasting cholesterol > 5.5mmols (%)	Elevated BMI > 25 (%)
WOMEN					
Year 1 (n = 58)	67	22	38	38	36
Year 3 (n = 48)	67	19	29	18	35
MEN					
Year 1 (n = 70)	86	54	26	43	71
Year 3 (n = 58)	75	49	15	14	38

*six standard drinks or more

The program had an 82% retention rate: 128 people commenced in year 1, 115 in year 2 and 106 were assessed again in year 3 (some people left the farming industry and moved away).

successfully identified people with mild or moderate mental health problems and made a number of referrals, Ms Brumby says.

After observing the effect of drought on people's health, one participant emailed Ms Brumby, asking to be sent reminders

about diets, exercise and recreation and social outlets. "As things tightened up during the first half of October the stress level rose," the grower reported. "We coped with the initial hurdle but in the last week or two I have heard of many cases of colds, flus, run-down immune systems.

"Under stress it seems to be taking us all longer to bounce back."

Ms Brumby says the program has helped to identify heightened health problems in times of drought, but was also turning health issues around more generally.

The three-year program begins with a two-day session where growers undergo a physical assessment and receive a kit that supports the information sessions on various health issues. They must submit an action plan, outlining personal goals and their strategies to achieve them.

In the following years, participants report their progress and feedback is provided by the health professionals and fellow growers.

"By the time we come to the third year people are empowered," Ms Brumby says. "They are self-sufficient, motivated and they know where to go for information. The program is delivered by health people who understand farming, it's delivered in their own community and most importantly, it's to do with their own industry."

In the program's latest incarnation, 'Reaching the Remote', workshops will be run in Katherine and Tennant Creek in the Northern Territory, Georgetown in Queensland, Walgett, NSW, and Esperance and Ravensthorpe in Western Australia.

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 More information: Walgett, NSW, workshop (26 February to 2 March 2007), Jodi Mclean, 0427 926 301, jodimclean@dodo.com.au; Esperance and Ravensthorpe, WA, workshops (19 to 23 March 2007) Dale Rooney, 08 9076 7063, dsrooney@dodo.com.au; Susan Brumby, 03 5551 8450, susan.brumbly@wdhs.net

THE FARM IS YOU ... SO ON YOUR BIKE

It took a bit of arm-twisting to get Jacci Rabone involved in the Sustainable Farm Families program. While her husband Harry was keen to volunteer, Jacci, despite being fit and always looking after herself, was not sure it would be her thing. "I'm not exactly a health nut," she says.

After some convincing, she reluctantly accompanied Harry on the 90-minute drive from their Kaniva property to Horsham, Victoria, for the first two-day session.

Attending was a big commitment for the couple, who farm 1214 hectares and have two young boys. But three years later and with their program completed, both Jacci and Harry are very happy she went, because it may well have saved her life.

After the first session, Jacci was referred to a specialist, who ordered two suspicious-looking moles to be tested. One was malignant.

"If I hadn't gone to the forum, it wouldn't have been detected," Jacci says. "I was a bit lucky."

While not quite as dramatic, Harry too found the program addressed some specific health concerns, particularly stress. He had an inkling that the long bike rides he enjoyed helped him relax and at the course he was told that exercise was indeed directly linked to mental health.

Now he has tools to help manage stress and a legitimate excuse to get on the bike. "If I'm feeling stressed out and I have time, I try to go for a ride," he says.

The stress management methods taught at the program have helped the Rabones cope with a drought that saw them harvest only five or six per cent of their crop.

But not only has the program addressed specific issues, it has enhanced their health overall. "Everything from eating to de-stressing to safety," Jacci says.

Jacci and Harry have improved in every measure - hip-to-waist ratio, BMI, blood sugar and cholesterol. They have also undertaken a safety audit of the farm.

And after a guided trip to the supermar-

ket on the program's first day taught the Rabone's how to read food labels to identify healthier options, the proprietors of Jacci's local general store agreed to stock low-fat and low-GI products.

Jacci says the course changed her perspective: "The farm isn't the paddocks and the crops and the machinery. The farm is you. And without you, the farm isn't worth anything."

- Melissa Marino

Improving in every measure: Harry and Jacci Rabone, participants in the Sustainable Farm Families program, on their Kaniva property. PHOTO: MELISSA MARINO

