

Pedalling into farming prime

More than a century ago "Twas Mulga Bill from Eaglehawk that caught the cycling craze", but today it might be Western Australian grain grower Colin Butcher who could be 'Banjo' Paterson's muse if the bush laureate was about.

The GRDC board director took up weekend cycling in his late 40s to shed some excess weight, but ramped up the kilometres after becoming

KEY POINTS

Compared with the general Australian male population, death rates for male farmers and farm managers aged 25 to 74 years (1999 to 2002) were higher for:

- cardiovascular disease (40.8 per cent higher)*
- prostate cancer (136.7 per cent higher)*
- haematopoietic and lymphatic system cancers (79.5 per cent higher)*
- skin cancer (58.7 per cent higher)
- cancers of the colon and rectum (38.5 per cent higher)
- intentional injury [suicide] (20.5 per cent higher)

* statistically significant (95% confidence interval)

SOURCE: ACAHS 2009

How well-protected is your biggest asset ... your health?

Physical outdoor work can make you tanned and strong, but not fit and healthy, and there is mounting concern about the comparatively poor health of Australian farmers. Melissa Branagh-McConachy reports

Rural living and the associated perception of healthful longevity, away from urban pollution and tension, has come into question, with research showing that male farmers are at a considerably higher risk of chronic illness than other Australian men.

Health has tended to take a back seat to farm safety programs, partly due to a lack of data – until now. And the results of research by the Australian Centre for Agricultural Health and Safety (ACAHS) at the University of Sydney are cause for a serious reassessment of priorities – personal and across the farming community. The death rate for farmers from often preventable chronic illness is 33 per cent higher than the general male population.

The study, conducted by ACAHS director Associate Professor Lyn Fragar and researcher Julie Depczynski, shows that farmers and farm managers aged 25 to 74 years are at higher risk of death from cancer, heart-lung diseases and injury.

The disturbing statistics, presented at the recent Farmsafe Australia conference in Perth, show that in comparison to the general male population, cardiovascular deaths are more than 40 per cent higher among male farmers; deaths from prostate cancer are more than 130 per cent higher; and cancers affecting the haematopoietic (blood producing) and lymphatic systems are 80 per cent higher.

Deaths from skin cancer among farmers surpass the general male population rate by almost 60 per cent, while cases linked to cancers of the colon and rectum are about 40 per cent higher.

The particular tragedy of suicide is

also investigated. Farmers are 20 per cent more likely to intentionally harm themselves than the overall male population and statistics for those over 65 years of age are double the national rate.

The findings are based on Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) cause-of-death data collected between 1999 and 2002 and 2001 Australian population census data. Both represent the most recent national figures citing occupation.

Statistics can be a dispassionate ledger. The story behind these numbers is people, particularly men, who have typically been slow to take their physical and emotional health seriously. The figures are bad, but unlike the source of most other farming stresses, good health is mostly within your control.

To help pinpoint the reasons for poor farmer health and to guide information and support programs, ACAHS now plans to analyse lifestyle and work factors that are particular to farming.

"Reasons for the higher rate of health-related deaths (among farmers) were not within the scope of this project, but may include higher risk factors, delays in initial consultation and diagnosis, and difficulties accessing treatment services," Ms Depczynski says.

"Farmers are exposed to environmental factors including the sun, and chemicals such as pesticides, which may increase the risk of cancer, while dusts from grain and pollen can trigger respiratory conditions such as asthma. There are also cultural and geographic issues that make farmers less likely to consult a doctor."

Also, the percentage of Australian

farmers aged over 55 jumped from 38 per cent in 2001 to 43 per cent in 2006, with a significant proportion of farmers working beyond retirement age.

Physical and social isolation, ongoing drought and declining terms of trade in the rural economy may also be contributing to increased levels of mental stress among farmers.

"We also know that alcohol consumption, smoking and obesity are comparatively higher in rural Australia, but further research is required to establish whether these findings apply to farmers."

Lifestyle factors and other potential causes of health-related death are now the focus of new research underway at ACAHS. "The data we have collected affirms this is an area of concern and will form the basis of proposals for external funding to develop intervention projects and awareness campaigns," Ms Depczynski says.

"A lot of farmers work well into their seventies by choice and it is a globally accepted phenomenon that people who are engaged in, and enjoy, their work are healthier.

"Therefore physical work could contribute to longevity if farmers maintain good health and remain injury-free by making work easier as they get older, for example by using lifting or vision aids."

Ms Depczynski recommends that growers book regular medical check-ups so that symptoms of illness or psychological distress can be identified early.

She also advocates participation in group activities that provide opportunities for farmers to discuss health issues and other concerns, and to become aware of solutions.

The ACAHS research has been incorporated into a health promotion resource: 'The Farm Health and Safety Toolkit for General Practices'. Designed to help rural health professionals better understand key health and injury issues affecting the agricultural industry, the toolkit also includes fact sheets for farmers.

More than 2000 rural Australians from all states have participated in Sustainable Farm Families™ (SFF), an initiative of Victoria's Western District Health Service that runs health and education workshops to tackle premature death, illness and injury.

A collaboration of health services, universities, agricultural agencies, training organisations and farming communities, the

SFF program's commitment to highlighting health inequalities in rural Australia has prompted the establishment of the new National Centre for Farmer Health (NCFH) in Hamilton.

NCFH director Associate Professor Susan Brumby says the centre, which is a partnership between Deakin University and the Western District Health Service, will address prevention and early identification of health risks and diseases linked to farming.

"Farm injuries have masked deeper health problems, limited research has contributed to a poor understanding of farm-related illness, and diverse health issues encountered in rural communities are inadequately covered by traditional medicine, nursing, health and agricultural courses in Australian universities," Associate Professor Brumby says.

One of the NCFH's goals is to provide professional training specific to health issues affecting farmers, agricultural workers and their families.

Through Deakin University's Medical School, Australia's first Agricultural Health and Medicine unit will be offered in Hamilton next February. Associate Professor Brumby says the five-day program will accommodate both health and agricultural professionals to help address the lack of agricultural health knowledge, improve service delivery, and open career paths in rural health.

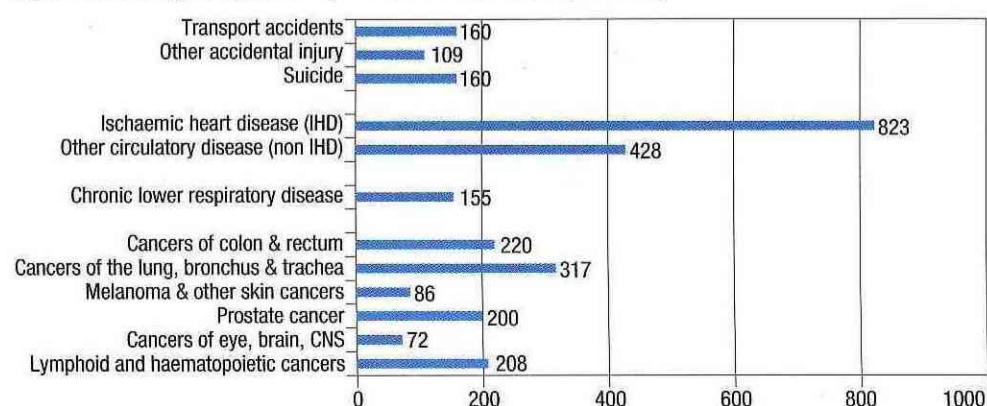
The NCFH is also doing further research to improve the health and wellbeing of farmers across Australia and continues to organise SFF programs in all states.

"SFF shows that farmers will connect with health professionals when programs are presented to them in an engaging and relevant way," Associate Professor Brumby says.

The NCFH receives funding support from the Victorian Government and the Helen and Geoff Handbury Trust.

The Farmsafe Australia conference was sponsored by the GRDC. □

FIGURE 1 Number of deaths by major causes (ABS), male farmers and farm managers aged 25 to 74 years, for the period 1999 to 2002 (n=4025)



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addicted to its benefits.

"I used to do 80 kilometres every Sunday because I enjoyed riding a road bike," he says. "It's good, quiet time away to contemplate life and put worries into perspective, but it also provides a healthy escape from farming and a relaxing alternative to going to the pub."

Over the past 18 months, Mr Butcher has gradually boosted his cycling workout to about 300 kilometres a week, rising at 5am two mornings mid-week and joining a weekend bunch ride in Perth, an hour and a half north-west of his 3100-hectare Brookton property.

He says his improved fitness levels have translated into higher energy output on the farm, where he produces wheat, oats, barley, lupins and canola, and breeds sheep for meat.

"I am 55 but doing as much work as a 35-year-old, so I need to be fit to maintain that level of productivity," he says.

"At baling time we keep irregular sleep patterns, but being fit stops me from getting exhausted. I no longer find long hours on the tractor tiring."

Although there is a common public perception that farmers are fit, Mr Butcher says practices have become increasingly mechanised and less physical.

"We don't exert the energy we used to, but cycling has given me the capacity to do that," he says. "It has also made me more aware of what I am eating because to be a good rider, diet is part of the package."

The cereal grower has also discovered his inner athlete. A regular participant in weekend veteran races, he has ambitions to follow in Lance Armstrong's tracks, competing in the 160-kilometre leg of the annual Tour Down Under Community Challenge, which will be held in Adelaide in 2010.

"I enjoy the racing side of cycling and having my sights set on the 'Challenge' has inspired me to do more kilometres, including sprint work and exertion

intervals," he says.

With plans to cycle into retirement and maintain a healthy lifestyle, it is unlikely the WA farmer will share Mulga Bill's fate – "perched above Dead Man's Creek".

"Fitness is about how well your body is working and how well you sleep; I now sleep more soundly and wake up more relaxed," he says.

"The weekend rides have also introduced me to a social network outside of agriculture, which is healthy in a small community."