

# Is your Farmer Healthy?

Earlier this year, the Sustainable Farm Families project released its current data on farmer health – results challenged farmers and generated a statement from Susan Brumby, Director of the National Centre for Farmer Health, “If farming livestock or crops were as unhealthy as farmers are, there would be a national crisis.” It is a statistical fact that agricultural workers, their families and communities experience higher rates of traumatic injury, some diseases and suicide in addition to poorer treatment outcomes than their city counterparts.

The National Centre for Farmer Health, is a partnership between Western District Health Service and Deakin University School of Medicine. To address the gap between farmer health outcomes and health service provision the inaugural Agricultural Health and Medicine course

was delivered by Deakin University at its Hamilton campus in February 2010. This program is a first for Australia, with five contact days on campus, distance modules with group work, online evaluation and a written assignment made up this innovative course.

Postgraduate students from VIC, NSW, SA, QLD and ACT attended the inaugural Agricultural Health and Medicine unit at Western District Health Service, Hamilton. The student group included nurses, veterinarians, social workers, public health students, health promotions students and rural professionals. In all, 15 presenters delivered lectures over the 5 days along with field trips to the local livestock yards and a working farm. Topics ranged from cancer and diabetes in rural and remote Australia through to mental health, health impacts of climate variability and zoonoses.

Beaufort & Skipton Health Service supported Community Health Nurse Bronwyn Cuthbertson to attend. Bronwyn was also successful in gaining a scholarship through Sustainable Farm Families to assist in with the cost of the course.

Key points influencing agricultural health were identified as

- Workforce age, the average age of farmers is 54yrs

- Workplace machinery cause injuries. Machinery age and maintenance can take its toll.

- Workplace environment. The great outdoors and its associated dangers of sun exposure, weather and ground surface and working with animals has a high incidence of disease and injury.

- Isolation, single workers and geographical distance from health care resources impacts on response to illness and injury, with many

farmers not seeking health care at the initial experience of illness or injury.

- Climate change, cultural and lifestyle expectations.

A Completion of this program has supported Bronwyn with her delivery of the Sustainable Farm Families program and she has been planning other community workshops. Since completing the Agricultural Health and Medicine course, she has also been involved in a Drug and Alcohol program for health professionals working with farming communities. The two programs work together to help address health issues that may affect farmers in our region. ‘Farming men and women in our community are often forgotten as they just get on with the job and rarely make a fuss. I want them to be able to maintain their best possible health’, said Bronwyn.



◆ Postgraduate students participating in the Agricultural Health and Medicine program at Hamilton in Feb this year