

Farm gates open on taboo topics

SUICIDE and alcohol misuse used to be taboo subjects, especially among farmers, but no longer.

These topics and others are top of the agenda for the National Centre for Farmer Health's inaugural conference, *Opening The Gates on Farmer Health*, next month.

And the main message is "Suicide kills fast... but boozers drink themselves slowly to death".

Speakers from around the country, and the world, are joining together to hammer home the message that rural Australia is a lot sicker than anyone – including farmers themselves – has recognised.

Anthony Hogan, a fellow at the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health at Australian National Universi-

ty, said the appalling farmer suicide rate revealed a dark side of the industry, and its community.

"Can it be these tragic outcomes are just the fate of isolated individuals who somehow find themselves bereft of social capital?" Dr Hogan said.

Dr Jayne Dowling, post doctoral research fellow at the Monash University, said workplaces with job insecurity, high stress, long and irregular hours and geographic isolation had been associated with a culture supporting alcohol use.

"This is a good description of much of Australia's farming industry," Dr Dowling said.

The Opening The Gates on Farmer Health conference is being held from October 11 to 13, in Hamilton, Victoria.