



CLINICAL associate professor and director of the National Centre for Farmer Health Sue Brumby with keynote speaker, Professor Kelley Donham, Occupational and Environmental Medicine University of Iowa USA and Director of the Iowa Centre for Agricultural Safety and Health.

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Gates open on farmer health

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THE gates on farmer health were thrown open at Hamilton last week with around 150 delegates from Australia and overseas attending the inaugural National Centre for Farmer Health Conference 2010 covering all facets of farmer health.

The National Centre for Farmer Health based in Hamilton, is delivering programs nationally that improve the health and well being of farm workers and farming families. Organising and hosting this conference in Hamilton is a huge achievement for the

National Centre for Farmer Health team.

That team is led by Sue Brumby, Clinical Associate Professor and Director of the National Centre for Farmer Health who said they are very excited to be hosting the inaugural conference.

"We are very excited, we had the Minister (Joe Helper) to open the conference and we have speakers from 14 universities from every state of Australia and some internationals as well. We also have the photography competition and the arts and health program, it's great.

"We are also importantly doing the Hamilton Charter for Farmer Health which we hope will become a really important document to help keep the momentum moving after the conference," she said.

The first of the international keynote speakers was Professor Kelley Donham, Occupational and Environmental Medicine University of Iowa USA and Director of the Iowa Centre for Agricultural Safety and Health.

Prof. Donham said we had to have a long range goal of addressing the issue - that we didn't want agriculture being more hazardous than other industries.

"With that in mind how do you get there?"

"Number one within our agricultural and economic policy we have to make sure that those policies don't endanger or make it any more difficult for farmers to have a safe and healthful operation.

"Sometimes the technologies and so on that come out look really good to increase your productivity so we can compete on the global market. They may in fact actually increase the health risks of the individual farmer.

"So we need to have a health impact analysis of our agricultural and economic policy so that is one of the key things," he said.

Prof. Donham said the other thing we need was to have a wide range of education in the field that he called agricultural medicine.

"Meaning that providers out there of all kinds and shapes need to really know and understand what farmers do that puts themselves at risk. It is not only the production end or the practises but also their culture and how they view things and to understand that.

"So that any provider can anticipate what kinds of problems might be happening on that particular kind of operation and that is going to lead them a lot quicker to any kind of a diagnosis and treatment," he said.

Prof. Donham believes that we have to make that a community effort.

"Not any one individual or health provider or any particular inspector is going to make a difference it has got to be the community that is totally involved all the way from the veterinarian to the health care provider to the fire brigade who ends up in rescuing people makes sure all of this is healthful and helpful," he said.

Prof. Donham said we need to try to establish circumstances where the farmer was in fact rewarded and make safety a value added product on the farm.

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"So if they bring their farm up to a certain safety standard then they have incentives that help meet their bottom line whether it be from getting incentives from their agribusiness partners who sell them tractors, so that tractor can be sold at a lower rate to a certified safe farm because they are going to be able to pay their loan off.

"And also farm lenders can provide those types of incentives for those who are certified safe. So making those kinds of incentives

for safety is I think a really critical issue," he said.

Finally Prof. Donham said we had to think that farmers were one of the most precious commodities that we have.

"We have to rely on less than two percent of the population to feed us all not only here in the developed countries but also the developing world, to provide those essential calories and nutrients to keep us alive.

"There has been no civilisation that has been successful without a productive agriculture and

as the people involved in agriculture become less and less they become even more precious to us," he said.

The second international keynote speaker was Mrs Linda Syson-Nibbs, Nurse Consultant in Public Health, Derbyshire, England who spoke about the outcomes of a health needs assessment she undertook eight years ago in Derbyshire.

She said the health needs assessment involved synthesising existing research information from local farmers and some local research among farmers about their health needs and using that to formulate new health services in the area.

Mrs Syson-Nibbs said that after listening to everything she had heard at this conference that the problems the farmers were facing in the UK were very similar to the problems farmers were facing in the US and Australia.

"Significant problems in mental health, muscular skeletal difficulties and problems associated with pesticides.

"And alongside that a population that is very stoic, in love with the land, predominantly farming for the love of the land rather than profit and reluctant to use formal health services, in that 'you just put up and shut up and get on with it'.

"From what I have learnt from the other speakers today that is pretty much par for the course here too.

What Mrs Syson-Nibbs did find during the assessment was that in rural areas in the UK there was inequality and often hidden deprivation being experienced by some farmers.

"The rural areas are generally known to be affluent and don't tend to attract much attention because in the UK you can have a huge inequality that exists on a house to house basis.

"So down one lane you could have a farm that has been converted into an amazing house for a solicitor who is enjoying very good health and at the other end of the lane you have a farmer who is just about managing to eke out a living off the land.

"So the inequalities literally vary on a house to house basis and they tend not to show up on traditional health statistics. "So if you were to look at a profile you would look at an area and say well that is an affluent area its rural it's beautiful and that would hide it. It would mask the deprivation that is experienced by the farmers that worked within that area," she said.

Mrs Syson-Nibbs said to address the problems they had a non-medical or holistic approach.

"So we weren't just thinking particularly about identifying a disease and treating it, we were trying to think of the wider determinants of health.

"Mostly the farming

communities solved the problems themselves because we listened to what they had to say we tried to see the world from their position and try and make solutions that work for them.

"One of the first things we did was set up a drop in health clinic at the agricultural market where the livestock was sold. That has now been running for six years and is very well used; there is a nurse, a physiotherapist and a podiatrist.

"We also converted a barn on a local farm and that has become a farming life centre where retired farmers can go and chew the fat and talk about farming with other retired men.

"One of the services we did set up was a citizen's advice bureau which was an agency that provided advice on debt management and legal issues for free. You can just walk in and they have become very well used by all the people in the rural community but it's a non-stigmatised way of getting some support.

"We work with young farmers, we developed a photographic project where young farmers worked alongside professional photographers to try and articulate their views about what was happening to farming in the UK.

"And we appointed a mental health worker and an agricultural chaplain and various other support services," she said.