

OUR COVER

Wayne Munro,
a farmer in
Hamilton, Victoria.

PHOTO:
Jane Murray



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Australian
Rural Doctor.

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Australian
Doctor.

Australian Rural Doctor is
published 10 times a year by
Reed Business Information.
Tower 2, 475 Victoria Ave Locked
Bag 2999 Chatswood DC NSW
2067 Ph: (02) 9422 2999
Fax: (02) 9422 2800 Website
www.australiandoctor.com.au
(inc in NSW) ABN 801 327
19861 ISSN 1449-0048 © 2010
by Reed Business Information
website: www.reedbusiness.com.au
Average Net Distribution
Period Ending March 2010
6639



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Standing up for safety

With hundreds of farmers killed in Australia each year, a Victorian program is helping to make our farmers aware of the constant risks of working the land.

STORY MELISSA SWEET PHOTOGRAPHY JANE MURRAY

Wayne Munro, 42, lives and works on the family farm near Hamilton in western Victoria where he grew up. Like many of his ilk, health and safety have not traditionally been high on his list of priorities.

There's far too much else to worry about, he once would have said.

But Mr Munro has made major changes over the past three years. He now works up a regular sweat at martial arts classes, and keeps a watchful eye on his cholesterol and general health.

The catalyst for change was attending a series of workshops that are offered to farmers and their families under the

Sustainable Farm Families program.

More than 2300 farmers across the country have done the program since 2003, when it was developed by Victoria's Western District Health Service with the aim of making farmers more aware of the links between their health, safety and financial wellbeing.

Participants in the program attend three workshops over a three-year period, and are given practical health and safety advice, including a supermarket tour with advice on how to read food labels. They are also encouraged to set goals related to their work, family, health and safety, and report back

each year how they went and what they learnt.

The program also includes a physical checkup, which has uncovered high rates of undiagnosed health problems, and led to about 70% of participants being referred to GPs or other health professionals.

At his first workshop, Mr Munro was shocked to discover that his health was not nearly as robust as he had assumed, even though he knew he was overweight. "It was a wake-up call for us all," he says. "We were pretty good at doing manual labour, but cardio-wise, we were very unfit."

The program's impact on health and safety will be

profiled at the first conference of National Centre for Farmer Health, which is on this weekend (October 11-13) in Hamilton.

The conference, called Opening the Gates on Farmer Health, is a partnership between the Western District Health Service and Deakin University's School of Medicine.

At one Farm Families workshop, Mr Munro and colleagues were asked for a show of hands if they had ever been taken to hospital because of an injury. Like everyone else in the room, Mr Munro put up his hand. He was thinking of the time a chainsaw sliced into his

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Hamilton farmer Wayne Muoro, who attended a farmers' health workshop ...
"It was a wake-up call for us all."

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leg, and the permanent damage that sheep and cattle handling have inflicted on his knees.

Even so, he was shocked to learn how many farmers are injured and killed every year.

Surveys of farmers who have done the program show about half report making safety changes as a result, and Mr Munro is one of them.

He is now much more conscious about assessing risks before doing a job, whether handling sheep or chemicals, and taking the time to first find his ear muffs and other safety gear. He has also splurged on better footwear.

And he insists that other family members do the same. "We have all gone out and got helmets, and even my 72-year-old father puts on a helmet as soon as he hops on the bike," Mr Munro says. "That was something we never did."

"If any other industry had the mortality and injury rates that farming does, there'd be an outcry. We'd have strikes and industrial and legal action."

DR ROBERT GRENFELL

Farm safety programs have been stressing the risks to children living on farms and visiting farms, and it's a message that rings true for Mr Munro. With his wife working away from the farm, childcare often means children accompanying him to work. "I drill safety into them very hard," he says.

Clinical Associate Professor Susan Brumby, one of the driving forces behind the Sustainable Farm Families program, brings an unusual combination of skills and experience

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Dr Robert Grenfell has learnt to recognise the subtle signs of mental health problems among farmers.

GPs urged to check out lay of the land

Dr Robert Grenfell first developed an interest in injury prevention in the late 1980s when working as a GP at Lorne in Victoria, and noticing how many patients had been hurt on the beach.

He did a study investigating the extent of beach-related injuries in the region, and the experience helped propel him into a career as a public health physician.

Just over a year ago he was appointed as senior medical advisor in preventive health with the Victoria Department of Health, but continues to work part time as a rural GP at Natimuk, a small town west of Horsham.

As with beach safety, there are many groups and agencies with an interest in farm safety, says Dr Grenfell, and prevention efforts need to engage them all.

He encourages other rural doctors to work with their divisions and other services in providing community education on farm safety. His standard talk on farmer health advises that there are three ages of safety.

"First you do your back, then you get your hernia, then you go deaf," he says. "I keep telling the young guys – 'get a hydraulic lifter for your one-tonner. It's the best three grand you will ever spend'."

Dr Grenfell advises doctors who are new to Australia, rural practice or a region to visit local properties to learn what the local farmers do, as

the risks vary between industries and regions.

"Our land is flat so tractors don't roll, but around Gippsland they roll all the time," he says. "If you go around the Grampians, where there are more sheep and vineyards, there are more musculo-skeletal injuries."

Farm safety needs to be seen within the broader context of the culture and economy of farming, Dr Grenfell adds.

"The culture of the Australian farming community is one of adaptability, acceptance of hardship and reluctance to cause a fuss, which is the challenge that any health professional faces in dealing with a rural community," he says.

Apart from asking about safety issues, Dr Grenfell also asks about issues such as farm succession planning, which he says is a major cause of distress and can feed into farm safety.

Over the years Dr Grenfell has learnt to recognise the subtle nuances that can suggest mental health problems.

"If a shearer comes to see me with his sunglasses on in the consultation, I know he's telling me something," he says. "You get the glasses off, and you look him in the eye and you go, you're depressed, aren't you?"

He adds: "If any other industry had the mortality and injury rates that farming does, there'd be an outcry. We'd have strikes and industrial and legal action. People just seem to think, that's farming."



FARM SAFETY: THE FACTS

The latest figures cover the period 2001 to 2004.

In that time:

- The leading causes of farm injury deaths of people aged 15 and over were tractors, quad bikes, farm utes and cars, motorbikes and horses. For children under 15, the leading causes were dam drownings, quad bikes, farm vehicles and fires.
- The rate of farm deaths varies widely between states, with 19 deaths occurring annually for every thousand farms in Tasmania, versus 3.8 deaths annually for every thousand farms in SA.
- Of all farm deaths recorded by coroners, 85% were in males. Almost 18% of all deaths were in children under 15, and 41% were in people aged over 55. Children visiting farms accounted for 23% of the farm deaths of children under 15.

Source: *Traumatic deaths in Australian Agriculture, The Facts, 2007*. National Farm Injury Data Centre, Australian Centre for Agricultural Health and Safety

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to her job as director of the National Centre for Farm Health, based at Hamilton. She ran her family's cattle and sheep property near Coleraine, Victoria, for 12 years, while also working as a nurse. With qualifications in farming and health management, she is now doing a PhD in farm family health.

Ms Brumby became interested in farm families' health as a result of her personal and professional experiences – as a nurse she saw too many farmers coming in late for treatment, and as a farmer, she saw too many colleagues being injured.

"I can name five people that I've known who have died on farms within a 70km radius," she says.

"I often say this to farmers, 'do you know other professions where you know people who have been killed or severely injured at work?' Production agriculture is recognised globally as one of the most hazardous occupations."

Ms Brumby believes one reason for the Sustainable Farm Families program's success is that it is framed as a farming activity.

"We felt if we made it a health program, farmers wouldn't relate to it," she says. "Our key message to farmers is this: 'the most important aspect of a healthy Australian farm is a healthy farm family'."

"The key thing we've learnt is that when you put health, wellbeing and safety altogether, some of those values about seeing the big picture flow on to changing safety attitudes and behaviours. I'm a really big fan of seeing safety in the whole context."

The Australian Centre for Agricultural Health and Safety at Moree in north-western NSW has been at the forefront of applied research aimed at reducing the toll of farm injuries.

It was founded in 1985 by Associate Professor Lyn Fragar, who became concerned by the extent of preventable farm injuries while working as medical superintendent at Moree Hospital.

The current director, Dr Tony Lower, says the centre's work has



contributed to a reduction in farm deaths through promoting measures such as rollover protection in tractors and increased awareness about the hazards of dams for children.

The centre also works with GPs and divisions to encourage uptake of its farm safety toolkit, which provides a health checklist for farmers and resources for rural doctors (www.aghealth.org.au). The checklist covers issues such as quad bikes, workshop injuries, injuries from tractors, augers and other machinery, pesticides and hearing loss. It also has tips for how to talk to farmers about mental health and suicide.

"The best thing we could possibly do for the health of Australian farmers, particularly given their median age, is for them to have an annual health checkup," Dr Lower says. "If we do nothing else, that would be a fabulous outcome."

He says farm injury deaths have fallen from about 150 a year 15 years ago to well under 100.

But major challenges remain and are exacerbated by the ageing of the workforce. Almost 40% of farmers are over 55, which means farmers are more vulnerable to both suffering injuries and their effects.

Dr Lower says the centre has a

"I can name five people who have died on farms within a 70km radius."

SUSAN BRUMBY

program developed by and for older farmers, which aims to make farmers fitter for work while also making farm tasks easier.

Dr Yossi Berger, national occupational health and safety co-ordinator for the Australian Workers Union, which represents many agricultural workers, says there is far more work to be done on farm safety.

"If you actually talk to farmers or workers on farms, you find that most workers have been very poorly trained," he says.

"I frequently speak to workers who can't even read English who are supposed to handle chemicals having read safety sheets, and not wearing gloves. They are not interested to

Mr Wayne Munro ...
concentrating hard on the job
helps to prevent injuries.



pursue the issue because they are scared of losing their jobs."

Dr Berger says the lack of safety training around quad bikes, which "kill as many as the mining industry", is also of major concern.

He says there should also be more attention to children's safety.

"There are forms of forced labour on farms which come close to family slavery," he says. "You have 11-year-old boys and girls climbing wheat silos."

Dr Berger believes that farm wives and women should be recruited as occupational health and safety officers. "The way into farms and into rural health and safety is going to have to be through farming women," he says.

"They are the ones that worry about the children being exposed to residue chemicals, who see their children contract asthma and skin diseases as a result of chicken sheds

and formaldehyde, and they smell their husbands coming home from a day's work covered in chemicals."

GPs are also well placed to contribute to farm injury prevention efforts, according to Associate Professor Tim Driscoll, an expert in epidemiology and occupational medicine at the University of Sydney, and they should be on the lookout for depression in farmers.

"Mental health is an important issue for safety," he says.

It's a comment that rings true for Wayne Munro. His state of mind has a big impact upon his safety at work, he says, especially during those busy times of the year when "your only social contact is your sheep dogs".

"It is cause and effect," Mr Munro says. "If your mind is elsewhere when you should be concentrating on a highly dangerous situation, then things happen." ●

USEFUL RESOURCES AND INFORMATION

The Australian Centre for Agricultural Health and Safety www.aghealth.org.au

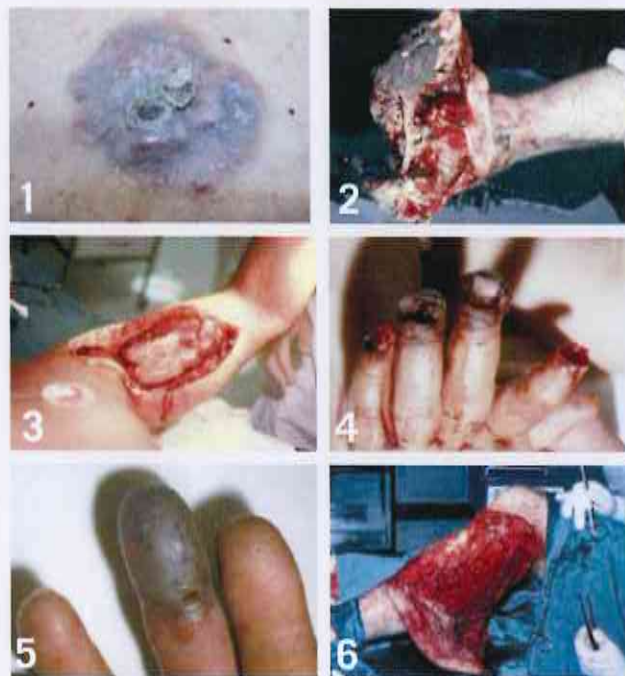
Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation www.rirdc.gov.au

Sustainable Farm Families program www.sustainablefarmfamilies.org.au

The National Centre for Farmer Health www.farmerhealth.org.au

US National Library of Medicines information on farm safety

www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/farmhealthandsafety.html



1. A basal cell carcinoma. 2. A foot crushed in a farm accident.
3. A crush injury. 4. A child's fingers injured in a sprocket.
5. Snakebite. 6. Tree ringer injury.

Images of farming gone wrong

During the Sustainable Farm Families program workshops, participants are shown graphic photographs of injuries sustained by farmers (examples above).

The collection belongs to Mr Stephen Clifforth, a surgeon in Hamilton for 24 years. While many assume that big machinery is the major culprit, Mr Clifforth says he sees many hand injuries suffered in everyday activities, such as closing gates.

Simple measures, like encouraging glove-wearing, could make a big difference, and not only in preventing injuries, but in reducing the toll of skin cancer, which he believes should be considered an important aspect of farm safety.

"Everybody in a rural area who is on a farm gets skin cancer," he says. "If someone is off a property, doctors need to raise peoples' awareness about skin cancer. We really need to make some effort to protect skin and hands."

Mr Clifforth says farmers should also be encouraged to keep communication devices with them at all times, as some of the worst injuries he has seen involved crush injuries exacerbated by the victims being trapped for hours before being found.

His experience reinforces national figures showing that quad bikes are a growing cause of injuries and deaths.

"Both motorbikes and quad bikes keep me pretty busy," Mr Clifforth says.