

# SFF health checks are farm lifeline

By ANNABELLE BEALE

**W**ESTERN DISTRICT farmers James and Lucie Peddie discovered health timebombs through rural reach-out program Sustainable Farm Families (SFF), but a rural health investment blackhole has resulted in the successful program ending next month.

As researchers link farmer injuries to deeper health issues, including higher rates of cancer, suicides, cardiovascular disease and stress, through more than 10 years of research, SFF has investigated the link between farming family health and safety and started addressing unacceptable rates of premature death, higher morbidity and injury on farms.

However, funding has ceased for the National Centre for Farmer Health's SFF program, which was established in 2002 and helped improve the lives through health, wellbeing and safety awareness of more than 2500 families in 125 communities nation-wide.

National Centre for Farmer Health director Sue Brumby said she feared the rural health progress and understanding made would now return to the catastrophic levels of death and injury prior to the program's commencement.

"When we started SFF in 2002 as a pilot project, we had limited anecdotal information about premature deaths, lack of access to health (services) and higher rates of injury and illness in men and women working in agriculture," Ms Brumby said.

"We will be going back into that scenario."

She said the government push for greater productivity needed to be encouraged through investment in human resources.

The success of the four-day program, which addresses farm safety, mental health, physical activity and nutrition, is evident in the Peddie family, who say it has

extended their lives and farming careers.

"We didn't feel there was anything particularly wrong with us: we aren't overweight, we aren't old and we thought we were active," Mr Peddie said after discovering through SFF health checks that he was borderline type 2 diabetic.

"I look at it a bit like farm management - prevention is usually cheaper than cure."

Encouragement from SFF health experts to "get answers" on Lucie's misdiagnosed aortic aneurysm 18 months ago resulted in open heart surgery in June last year.

"The specialists found two holes in my heart and a vein going into the wrong side," Mrs Peddie said.

"I didn't have any real side effects - I was getting breathless but I kept thinking that was my asthma."

"My heart was getting bigger and bigger and I would have eventually needed a heart and lung transplant."

Mr Peddie said the program helped address the myth that living off the land meant farmers were healthy.

Since attending SFF, the Peddies undertake regular occupational health and safety audits, exercise more, and attend fun runs and local gym classes.

"There are regular periods in the year when everything on the plate has come off the property, veggies from the garden, lamb we have produced ourselves and we think we must be living a healthy (life)," he said. "You compare your life to people in the city, surrounded by pollution and stuck inside all day - but you forget about what's going on inside (your body)."

The SFF program aims to equip farm men and women with the knowledge of living healthier lives through understanding exercise, healthy foods, mental health and farm safety.

Mr Peddie said it had changed their lives for the better.

"There is pressure to grow business and become more efficient



James and Lucie Peddie say their involvement in the SFF rural health program has changed their lives and improved their business for the better. The four-day program has boosted their health, fitness and safety around the farm, allowing them to keep up with children Annabel and Jock (also pictured dogs Jet and Star).

## Where's the money for health?

**WITH** no secure funding to continue the National Centre for Farmer Health (NCFH), based at Hamilton, the blame-game among government parties responsible for filling the black hole has begun.

The future of NCFH looks grim after its \$1 million annual grant was cut in last year's State budget and the last of the centre's programs - Sustainable Farm Families - was scheduled to end next month.

The nearing potential closure of the centre - previously funded by the now-defunct whole-government Future Farm

Strategy - has sparked a political row between the Federal and State governments as to where the money should come from.

Last year State Health Minister David Davis requested it be jointly funded by the Federal Government, but a spokesperson for Federal Health Minister Tanya Plibersek said if the State Government considered the centre a worthwhile investment, the project should receive ongoing State investment.

"Mr Davis declined to provide

ongoing support," the spokesperson said.

"Needless to say, we were disappointed by Mr Davis's decision and the implications it has for farmers."

A State Government spokesperson said the government was "willing to play its part" in securing the future of the NCFH but it was a national centre and therefore the Victorian Government was looking to the Federal Government and other State governments to form a partnership to continue its operations.

but part of getting to that bigger scale is that there is less manual stuff; the reality is, to keep up we are becoming more sedentary," he said.

"The thing about exercising regularly is that you don't fatigue as much when you are working physically - it has definitely extended our farming careers."

Five independent reports have concluded the program improves the health of participants and supports the program.

These include an economic evaluation which concludes there is a return on investment of 5.6 to 1.

Rural health expert Ms Brumby said the government's big push to increase productivity by 2020 need-

ed to be met with investment in human resources.

"(Once the program has ceased) there is nothing specifically targeting farmers' health, wellbeing and safety that is done in a farming context," she said.

"Agricultural health and medicine is a specialised area - health practitioners and policy people working in rural areas and agricultural communities need to understand the context of agricultural production and its impact on individual families and communities."

"This context has not been well understood - that is where we have been filling the knowledge gap."

Ms Brumby said the program met stringent goals set by the govern-

ment, including improving rural health, supporting regional development, increasing agriculture productivity and building capacity in regional communities.

However, "then funding has just stopped as agriculture is wanting to be even more productive within challenging climatic and market forces", she said.

"We have lost some of the staff already - you are never going to cobble those people back together and the area and the industry lose the expertise," Ms Brumby said.

"If we can manage to keep the centre afloat, which we currently don't have ongoing funding for, it might be able to be revived once it is dismantled."

# CASH BACK ON GATES



## Cyclone

The famous Cyclone gates offer is back! Receive \$10 cash back\* on every gate you purchase from 1st May to 30th June 2013. To take advantage of this great offer, download your claim form at [www.onesteelcyclone.com.au](http://www.onesteelcyclone.com.au) and return with your proof of purchase to: Cyclone Gate Promotion Offer, PO Box 586, Crows Nest, NSW 1585.

**CASHBACK OFFER**  
1ST MAY TO 30TH JUNE

\*For Terms & Conditions refer to [www.onesteelcyclone.com.au](http://www.onesteelcyclone.com.au)

\*Registered trademark of OneSteel Wire Pty Limited ABN 59 000 010 873, Ingham St, Mayfield NSW 2304, CYC0019/S/L

