

Cash crisis hits farm health service

A WORLD-FIRST farmers' health service has been forced to shut down after the State Government failed to fund it.

The Sustainable Farm Families program, run through the National Centre for Farmers Health, finished last week and the centre is expected to close by the middle of next year due to a lack of funding.

The program, which runs out of Hamilton, helped educate farmers about their mental and physical health and trained medical students in farm-related issues,

Michelle Ainsworth

founder Sue Brumby said.

"The centre certainly has saved Victorian farmers' lives ... it's made a huge difference," she said.

More than 2500 families have gone through the program since it began 10 years ago. Western District Health Service Chief Executive Jim Fletcher said \$1 million would keep it operating.

"It's extremely disappointing because the program has demonstrated it is making a difference to the health, wellbeing and safety of farm

families and that's been independently evaluated," Mr Fletcher said.

"The governments keep on indicating that they want our farmers to be highly productive, that Australia wants to be the food bowl of Asia — well to do that you've got to have healthy farmers."

Victorian Farmers Federation president Peter Tuohey said it was critical the centre stayed open as farmers in the southwest faced drought-like conditions.

Health Minister David Davis's spokesman Ashley Gardiner said the Govern-

ment was committed to the SFF program and had offered \$250,000 for the centre, if the Federal Government contributed \$500,000.

"It is disappointing that the Commonwealth has declined to support the program, given the national nature of the National Centre for Farmer Health," Mr Gardiner said.

Federal Health Minister Tanya Plibersek's spokesman Dan Doran said a recent meeting of health ministers from around the country agreed the program was best funded at a state level.