

Doctors get urgent call from farm community

Some of Australia's leading occupational physicians have received a rural wakeup call.

More than 30 members of the Australasian Faculty of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (AFOEM) heard speakers including a clinical professor, AgriSafe clinician; rural vet and agricultural health and medicine lecturer outline the issues faced by rural industry.

AFOEM meeting chair Dr Judy Balint described the meeting as "enlightening" for the doctors, many of whom are city based.

"Farming is a group a lot of us have not had a lot to do with," Dr Balint says.

"But the presenters did a valuable, and fascinating, job of introducing us to the challenges faced by people on the land – both because of their work and their remote locations," she says.

"The range of presentations covered chemicals, even the inherent dangers of animal vaccination was alarming, ergonomics, other areas of safety needs and the ever-present issue of mental and general wellbeing."

"It was alarming that the further a farmer is from help, the longer they delay making vital decisions to seek medical assistance."

"These are parts of the rural stereotype which need to be understood, and broken down."

Dr Balint says that as a medical community, doctors providing occupational and environmental medicine need to be "much more conscious" of the special needs of the farming industry.

She says people are getting a "little" more accepting of things such as mental health, but there is a long way to go.

"The feedback from the doctors who attended the evening was incredibly positive," Dr Balint says.

"They were all amazed at how little they knew of the area and were keen for more information on agricultural health and medicine," she says.

Dr Richard Lunz, a past AgriSafe manager with the National Centre for Farmer Health based at Western District Health Service in Hamilton and now training as a specialist in occupational health,

says the work NCFH is doing and the way it is raising awareness for the rural community is outstanding.

He says one of the biggest challenges rural Australia faces is the classic Australian malaise – the tyranny of distance.

“It cuts both ways, getting farmers to make long trips to big cities for specialist help, and getting doctors to commit to serving remote locations and understanding the uniqueness of farmers and agricultural workers,” Dr Lunz says.

“We need to refine it, farmers are smart people but doing a full rehab program, for example, can be a challenge, just in the travel and making the time available,” he says.

“But the response at the NCFH presentation was very encouraging, the doctors asked a lot of questions and were already looking for ways at improving services.”

“Another issue faced by farmers is as grassroots as health insurance. Even if farming families can afford health insurance, the way their business is structured can impact on how effective that can be.”

Clinical associate professor Susan Brumby, foundation director of NCFH, who has been working in agriculture and health for 25 years presented and spoke about the need for both rural health and agricultural workforce to have the skills, education and understanding of Agricultural Health and Medicine when working in and with farming communities.

Dr David Rendell, a livestock vet spoke on veterinary chemicals and safety issues while Dr Scott McCoombe, course chair at Deakin University addressed agricultural emergencies and farm injuries.

Further details available from

Susan Brumby, National Centre for Farmer Health, on (03) 5551 8533.