

It's a big job whichever way you measure it

Robinvale District Health Service covers 60,000 square kilometres and everyone inside that area.

Community health nurse Lisa Taggart doesn't have to travel to every corner of that big slice of country, but has plenty to do in her role.

Which is why she has been delighted to receive a scholarship to attend Deakin University's second HMF701 Agricultural Health and Medicine Unit in Hamilton.

Coming off a broadacre farm at Annuello, Lisa says she is expecting the course, which runs from February 28 to March 4, to provide her with specific skills to build on the services she already delivers to agricultural communities.

She has already delivered two Sustainable Farm Families programs in partnership with the National Centre for Farmer Health in Hamilton and sees this course as an extension of her ability to provide even more.

"I see this as the start for me, not the end," Lisa says.

"I saw so much good achieved by the people who took part in the SFF programs, and as the community health nurse since 2007 I know there is a lot more this course will enable me to do," she says.

"RDHS is a primary health centre, from the hospital to our hostel and aged care facilities, all of which are critical in a regional hub.

"I would also like to get a network going with people who fill similar roles in different areas, where we can listen to each other and turn to each other for support and advice.

"In courses such as these I feel the participants are as important as the presenters.

"Presenters will give us the knowledge, but the chance to hear from people what this course has done for others, and to know there will be people out there with the same goals and training but different experiences will be so helpful."

Drought, floods – farming pain takes a new course

Karen Seiler has seen it all – and none of it is getting any easier.

Which is why the Wooroolin, Queensland-based counsellor is heading to Hamilton in Victoria for Deakin University's second HMF701 Agricultural Health and Medicine Unit.

For years the counsellor's focus has been on families caught in drought – and now it is floods.

Karen, who comes off a mixed farm, which includes beef cattle and a piggery, says attending the inaugural National Centre for Farmer Health conference in Hamilton last year has opened a new world for her.

“My work is all about improving people's health and wellbeing so they can lead better lives,” Karen says.

“I was also closely involved with a Sustainable Farm Families from the National Centre for Farmer Health course up here and have seen firsthand how it changed the lives of every participants,” she says.

“It was very much in-your-face stuff which confronted people, forcing them to take a really serious look at their lives.”

Karen has been awarded a scholarship to attend the HMF701 course, which starts on February 28 and runs until March 4.

She says that “valuable support” will give her further skills to deal with the rapidly changing profile of the agricultural community in her region.

Changes she says which are resulting in each farmer working harder, and longer, to achieve the same outcomes.

“With a major power station and coal mining operation in this area it is almost impossible for agriculture to compete for staff so the burden increasingly falls back on the farm family,” Karen adds.

“I have run 11 wellbeing days for women in the South Burnett region, with an emphasis on physical health and mental wellbeing but am expecting this course to give me better tools to approach the whole family,” she says.

“I also believe meeting participants, and learning from them about what they do in their areas, what works and what doesn't, will provide a great networking base.”

Key to future farming in increasingly hard world

When it comes to farm health Jan Mills has devoted most of her life to not just achieving it – but always improving it.

And helping to run family beef cattle properties in NSW’s Tabulam district, she knows firsthand just how crucial it is.

Which is why the North Coast Area Health Service farm health specialist is heading to Hamilton in Victoria for Deakin University’s second HMF701 Agricultural Health and Medicine Unit.

“It’s not just the physical safety on the job, it is helping farmers and their families deal with stress, which has become a such a huge problem,” Jan says.

“In the past 10 years farmers have been forced to live with incredible drought, and now the floods, and it is just grinding people down,” she says.

“At the same time industry progress, its technology, is accelerating from the ground up, and farmers have to keep abreast of all that, deal with so much more paperwork and too often have to do it with fewer staff.

“There are more demands on fewer people and so the need for greater support is so urgent.”

Jan says she is grateful for the scholarship she has received to attend the course, which runs from February 28 to March 4 because she believes it will further develop her knowledge and skills.

Having played a key role in establishing FarmSafe in her area, and introducing Future Farmer field days for high school students, she says she is looking forward to swapping information with course participants.

“This will give me – and my clients – access to a tremendous network of rurally-based experts and when you are on your own in a remote area, knowing people you can call to discuss a problem is so valuable,” she adds.

Big country, big challenge and a bigger opportunity

Everything about Queensland farming is big – the size of the state, its big herds and its big stations.

And the big challenges which come with them.

Genevieve McDonald lives on Brightlands Station, out of Cloncurry, and has put a lot of work into developing her current role as a mental health project officer.

It started with her bachelor of agribusiness and will continue from February 28 to March 4 at Hamilton in Victoria when she does Deakin University's second HMF701 Agricultural Health and Medicine Unit at Western District Health Service Hamilton, Victoria.

Genevieve received a scholarship to attend the course, which she says she wanted to attend because it offered a specialist course with an agricultural focus.

She says there are a lot of medical courses available but this is the only one she could find which took into account the unique issues confronting agricultural Australia.

"I think there will be two advantages from attending this course," Genevieve says.

"One will be the pure education and adding it to my skill set," she says.

"The other, which I hope will be long-term, will be meeting with the people from all over Australia who will be there, like me, to also learn what other people in the field have been doing, are using and are interested in workplace health and safety.

"Farming is a dangerous business, and not just the physical danger, and while I have good local networks, I hope to come home from this with the start of an effective national network of people, one where we all understand the challenges rural Australians face."

Genevieve has just completed a series of Tie Up The Black Dog seminars, which attracted as many as 100 people at a time.

She says she sees it as vital to reduce the stigma surrounding mental problems in the community and that's what her seminars were all about.

Deakin's unit chair Dr Scott McCoombe says the most important aspect of a productive agricultural industry is a healthy workforce.

He says HMF701 will increase participant's understanding of the social, environmental, physical and mental health factors that result in higher rates of injury, illness and death in rural and remote communities.

Dr McCoombe says there are still a few places left for this course "and we hope to see them filled in the next week or two".

"This information will be beneficial to professionals looking to improve agricultural production and sustainability or to improve health provision, research, policy and literacy in rural and remote communities," Dr McCoombe says.

"Just as importantly, it aims to develop the next generation of rural and agricultural health leaders to improve the health, safety and wellbeing of rural and remote Australians," he says.

National Centre Farmer Health director Sue Brumby says the five-day intensive unit has been developed to appeal to multidisciplinary graduate-level students and professionals from nursing, medicine, health, agricultural science, agribusiness, social work, veterinary and environmental science backgrounds.

Associate clinical professor Brumby says rural professionals, health professionals, healthcare administrators and policy makers will enhance their knowledge of the physical and mental health issues facing today's rural and remote communities by undertaking this unit.

She says on completion graduates with a relevant health degree will be eligible to become an AgriSafe provider.

"This unit has no prerequisites. It is available to all postgraduate-level students but also to interested professionals from agricultural, education, policy or health backgrounds," she says.

"If you work with, or for, the farming industry this course is a rare opportunity to not just boost your own skills but become a proactive contributor within your community," she says.

The five-day intensive curriculum will cover the following topics:

- Agricultural medicine conditions and co-morbidities
- High risk remote populations and chronic disease
- Rural respiratory health
- Climate impacts on farmer health
- Vision and hearing injuries
- Common cancers in agriculture
- Traumatic agricultural injury
- Remote emergency medicine
- Addiction, suicide and mental illness in rural Australia
- Pesticide and veterinary chemical hazards
- Musculoskeletal health and ageing
- Zoonotic diseases

Dr McCoombe says a better understanding of these agricultural health, safety and wellbeing issues will help improve the health outcomes of farming men, women, children and agricultural workers.

He says at the end of the unit participants will be able to:

1. Describe clinical contributors to poor physical/mental health in the agricultural workforce
2. Comment on constraints in farming communities and how they influence health
3. Discuss OH&S risks associated with agricultural communities
4. Consider interventions including health promotion and primary care models
5. Critically evaluate agricultural health and medicine literature
6. Use the internet to investigate and address agricultural and rural health problems
7. Develop skills to implement this new knowledge in your professional life.

Further details are available from Sue Brumby or Scott McCoombe on (03) 55518533 or ncfh@wdhs.net