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Learning the healthy way

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A new program is bringing health information to country people

When South Australian farmer Richard Burgess received a flyer about a pilot health program, he put it in the bin. Now he is an enthusiastic advocate for it.



[Photo (left): Richard and Jody Burgess: "I wish we had something like this 20 years ago," Richard says.]

Richard and his wife Jody, of Gulnare, north of Clare, are members of the Farm Management 500 mid-north group and were invited to participate in the Sustainable Farm Families project. The three-year initiative is led by the Western District Health Service in Victoria, in collaboration with Farm Management 500, RMIT University and Land Connect. It is funded by the Joint Research Venture on Farm Health and Safety.

When the couple received the flyer about the workshop, Jody was going to go on her own. "They were keen on couples so Richard eventually decided to come," she says.

Twenty people participated in the initial two-day workshop, held in Clare in February 2004. The first session started with benchmarking, taking details of each person's general health that included fasting cholesterol and blood sugar levels, blood pressure, weight, height and body fat.

"They spent a reasonable amount of time on health concerns such as cancer, diabetes, stress and cardiovascular disease," Richard says. "There were a lot of statistics on how country people were less healthy than city people."

Jody adds: "I was always interested in health and this went into greater detail. We learnt a lot about cholesterol and it made me want to get to school and discuss healthy eating." Richard and Jody have four boys and healthy eating has always been a priority.

One of the activities held at the workshop was a trip to the local supermarket for an exercise in reading the labels of different food products. "It was an eye-opener for many people," Jody says. "Just how much sugar, fat or salt is contained in many of the products we feed the kids."

Other topics included mental health and how to recognise anxiety and other pointers to more significant health problems.

At the end of the two-day session each individual or couple was asked to detail an action plan to improve their health, wellbeing and safety and plan ways they would achieve this. Richard and Jody say common goals among the group included lowering cholesterol levels, maintaining a healthy weight, addressing farm health and safety and improving diet.

"We set out to reduce our fat intake and also purchased a treadmill," Jody says. "A lot of participants went out and bought push bikes and couples started going on walks together."

A second session was held 12 months later and began by measuring members' weight, waist, fasting cholesterol, blood sugar and blood pressure and comparing the results to the previous year. "My cholesterol and weight were both down and some people had lost quite a bit of weight," Richard says.

This year, the sessions concentrated more on mental health issues. A third and final session will be held in 2006.

The innovative program has brought health information to country people in a style that is both interesting and informative. "I wish we had something like this 20 years ago," Richard says. "It should be an on-farm training program through TA FE or something else."

Jody adds: "It certainly made us feel more fallible. We are always too busy to worry about health and after the course we reviewed our life insurance."

Both Richard and Jody think the course would be ideal for the wider farming community. "I was dragged there kicking and screaming but am now an advocate for anyone who would want to do the program," Richard says.