

## Top speakers on way

**DANIELLE GRINDLAY**

BIG names from Australia and overseas have secured their place for the National Centre for Farmer Health conference, 'Sowing the Seeds', in Hamilton, but neither our state nor our federal health minister have agreed to attend.

Extending on the inaugural conference of 2010, this September speakers will present on the success of programs and the change within communities.

"We'll exemplify what has been achieved, but we don't want this to be the swan song," conference co-ordinator, Felicity Little said.

From the president of the National Farmer's Federation, the director of the National Institute for Rural and Regional Australia, the director of Safe Work Australia and the general manager of Foodbank Australia, to doctors, farmers, toxicologists, authors and medical directors, key stakeholders will come together to pave a future for Australian farmers; but not state health minister, David Davis, or federal health minister, Tanya Plibersek.

Thus, the opening address is yet to be decided.

"Discussions have been underway for a very long time, but we haven't heard anything at this stage," Ms Little said.

Neither minister responded when asked by The Spectator if they would be attending the event.

Fourteen keynote speakers from America and all states of Australia will be complemented by 56 concurrent speakers, who have developed their own research on issues relating to farmer health, wellbeing and safety.

With 200 delegates from Africa, New Zealand, America and Australia, Ms Little said the event would be a huge economic

boost for the region.

"A national event like this is bringing people out of city centres and into regional communities, and that's what is important," she said.

Agricultural hazards and safety is one of the major themes with speakers presenting research on fatalities and hazards on the farm.

University of Wisconsin's Dr Lisa Schiller will speak about the her project in America that involves taking senior undergraduate nursing students to dairy farms for health and safety education.

Safe Work Australia director, Julie Hill, will speak on 'Agriculture: A dangerous industry'.

The centre hopes to later publish a book with about 15 of the best abstracts from the conference.

"It is really important that the message is put across, that we are a national centre and we are drawing national keynote speakers for the conference and delegates," Ms Little said.

"It's full steam ahead and if we are unable to get any more funding, yes this conference will be hugely important for the national centre and act as a big swan song and presentation of all the great work we've been doing."

Victoria's health minister is leading discussions with federal and other state ministers about investing in the centre to ensure its survival.

"We are aware that there has been some communication, but we're not privy to those discussions," Western District Health Service chief executive, Jim Fletcher said.

A spokesman for the federal health minister confirmed that the Commonwealth Government had been approached by Victoria's health minister.



SHARING stories ... Matthew Johnstone encourages farmers to start their own group, in the absence of essential support. SUPPLIED

## Validation, the great healer

"HE was a lovely kind man, but he was just one of those farmers; he was too proud to ask for help."

After losing his father to alcoholism and surviving the "pretty mental" family life on a farm, Matthew Johnstone has plenty to say about the state of mental health in farming communities.

Author of many books, including 'I had a black dog' about living with depression, Mr Johnstone will present on mental health at the National Centre for Farmer Health conference, 'Sowing the seeds'.

"A lot of farmers have been doing it really tough in this country," he said.

"And I think if I look at my dad as an example, farmers are not only isolated by the land, but by the culture."

Now creative director of the Black Dog Institute in New South Wales, Mr Johnstone develops creative, educational programs on understanding mental health, mood disorders, mindfulness and resilience for schools and the workplace.

"The terrible thing about farmers is that they'll fix a broken fence or mend a lame cow, but when it comes to looking after themselves, they've got to have a heart attack before they get their heart checked," he said.

While Mr Johnstone is encouraged by a new focus on mental health in regional communities, he said there were many parts of our culture that remained a bit topsy-turvy.

"I turned up in a town to do a mental health talk during the drought and they had a massive open bar," he said.

"The excuse was, 'they only come if there is free alcohol'."

He said alcohol was so much a part of our culture and

almost a birthright in Australia.

"In the rural country, you either play sport or go to the pub," he said.

"But I think things are improving – knowledge is power and validation is a great healer."

Mr Johnstone said there was never enough government funding for services in rural areas, but he believes in the power of the individual and the community.

'I had a black dog', first rejected by seven publishers, is now sold in more than 25 countries," he said.

Following his success, one of the first talks Mr Johnstone was invited to, was in a rural community in Dubbo.

A couple, who had lost their son to suicide without warning, decided to hold a mental health awareness day.

"More than 500 people turned up that day, and that shows that

even though rural communities have some difficulty in communicating things, there is incredible support for people," Mr Johnstone said.

"If the services aren't there, people can do great things themselves through support groups."

But Mr Johnstone said the onus was on government departments to invest in those missing services.

"If you invest in mental health and in the individual in the community, you will get the results," he said.

"It's about saying that it's okay to ask for help and giving people the facts about how to deal with depression and what to look for.

"We can turn things around and there's a great need to do so, because things are only getting tougher for the farmer."

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