

Suicide kills fast – but boozers drink themselves slowly to death

In the next 12 months, with a high degree of certainty, some Australian farmers will kill themselves.

For other farmers, the only problem with their drinking will be not having enough alcohol.

Either way, families will be torn apart or small communities will suffer.

Suicide and alcohol misuse are two of the most important items on the agenda for the inaugural National Centre for Farmer Health (NCFH) in Hamilton, Victoria, from October 11 to 13.

Speakers are coming from around the country, and the world, to hammer home the message that rural Australia is a lot sicker than anyone – including farmers themselves – has recognised.

Dr Anthony Hogan, a fellow at the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health at Australian National University, says social capital is said to be protective of one's mental health and rural communities are said to be rich in social capital.

But he says the appalling farmer suicide rate reveals a dark side of the industry, and its community.

“Can it be these tragic outcomes are just the fate of isolated individuals who somehow find themselves bereft of social capital?” Dr Hogan says.

“I will be looking at how, in communities rich in social capital and resilience, individuals can become so disconnected from supportive social processes,” he says.

“We will also consider how it can be that a critical breach of the taken-for-grantedness of everyday life can occur in the rural context and note how such pivotal events in turn catalyse into effect and to great consequence, the intense psycho-social dynamics of social identity, social role, economics and shame.”

Alcohol is the most commonly used drug in Australia. Recently, there have been indications there is a greater incidence of high-risk drinking within rural populations as compared with their urban counterparts.

High-risk drinking is associated with numerous conditions, such as diabetes, heart attack and cancer, as well as acute harms such as assault, suicide and road accidents.

Dr Jayne Dowling, post doctoral research fellow at the Monash University, says workplaces with job insecurity, high stress, long and irregular hours and geographic isolation have been associated with a culture supporting alcohol use.

“This is a good description of much of Australia’s farming industry,” she says.

“High levels of alcohol use are common in Australia and the risks associated with alcohol use, other than driving while intoxicated, are not well known.

“Research into substance misuse clearly identifies strong relationships between the use of drugs and alcohol and mental health problems, physical injury, reduced workplace productivity, accidents, drink-driving and violence.

“Workplace culture is said to be critical in shaping drinking behaviour although few studies have examined the way the work environment supports hazardous alcohol use.”

‘Smoke breaks’ and shearing ‘cut outs’ are common farming workplace rituals relied on for team building, camaraderie and relaxation.

An increased concern with the health impacts of drugs and alcohol has put the spotlight on substance use in relation to work and farming industries.

The Opening the gates on farmer health conference is being held on Oct 11 – 13, 2010 in Hamilton Victoria.

Further details are available from Sally Stevenson, National Centre for farmer Health, 0355518533