



**Winner Overall Newspaper Excellence 2012 – Country Press Association
Media Outlet of the Year 2012 – Rural Press Club Victoria**

CRYING SHAME

DANIELLE GRINDLAY

HAMILTON philanthropist, Geoff Handbury AO, has called on the Prime Minister to override “childish politics” and fund an award-winning rural health program.

Generally reserved in giving his opinion publicly, Mr Handbury said he was finally compelled to speak out after watching the “life-saving program mutilated by a lack of funds”.

In 2003, Mr Handbury provided \$1million for the creation of ‘Sustainable Farm Families’ (SFF) – a program designed to address the elevated rates of premature death and disease in farming families.

Delivered by the National Centre for Farmer Health, SFF has since attracted international interest and received numerous awards.

The Canadian Government funded delegates to visit Hamilton earlier this month, with a view to adopting the centre’s methods overseas.

But a lack of support from the State and Commonwealth Governments saw the program delivered in Australia for the final time, in Cavendish, last week.

“It’s a crying shame and I thought it was time I got cracking and did something,” Mr Handbury said.

“We’ve started this, we’ve got it going – now all we want is for the Government to realise that we’ve got something that’s worth running with.”

“We chose to put the centre in Hamilton, where it’s not a marginal area for votes, so the politicians don’t need to do much; they obviously haven’t done enough because we’ve got no funding.”

- Geoff Handbury AO.

Along with Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, Mr Handbury penned personalised letters to the Victorian Premier, State and Federal Agriculture Ministers and their colleagues in the Health Department.

“(The centre) is clearly being used as a political football and it is childish,” Mr Handbury said.

“I saw a need and we’ve got the proof that this program is helping that need; it’s just so important and I think they might take a bit of notice from me.”

The centre has been rallying for funds since it was left out of the 2012 State Budget.

Agricultural Minister, Peter Walsh, claimed the centre’s work did not fit into his portfolio, instead placing the responsibility on the Health Department.

Health Minister, David Davis, then claimed that the centre was doing work on a national level and therefore called on his Federal counterpart to provide support.

Mr Davis has pledged a conditional \$250,000, but only if the Commonwealth matches it with \$750,000.

But Federal Health Minister, Tanya Plibersek, rejected a bid for funding, claiming the centre was a Victorian initiative and therefore a Victorian Government responsibility.

The centre’s Agrisafe Clinic, which offered farmer-specific health checks, testing and information also ceased, due to insufficient funding.

The funding crisis was placed in the hands of local politicians, but Mr Handbury said there was little pressure on them to act.

“We chose to put the centre in Hamilton, where it’s not a marginal area for votes, so the politicians don’t need to do much,” he said.

“They obviously haven’t done enough because we’ve got no funding.”

While others claim to have pushed for funding in private, Western Victoria MPs, Gayle Tierney and Jaala Pulford, were the only representatives to address

The Spectator
HAMILTON
TUESDAY, JULY 23, 2013
32 PAGES
Rec. Retail \$1.30 inc GST



OUTRAGED ... Geoff Handbury AO has called on the Prime Minister to invest in the health and well-being of Australian farmers by funding the Hamilton-based National Centre for Farmer Health. Photo: DEAN KOOPMAN.

130720dk02

the issue in parliament.

Ms Tierney attended the centre’s bi-ennial conference this year and said the lack of funding was “incomprehensible and extremely short sighted”.

“We have been very disappointed with the Napthine Government’s responses to numerous parliamentary speeches Gayle has given,” a spokesperson for Ms Tierney said this week.

“The (Health) Minister has either avoided answering the questions or we don’t receive a response at all.”

When confronted on an unrelated visit to Hamilton, the Health Minister told The Spectator he would “not give up” on finding a funding solution.

Mr Davis has consistently ignored The Spectator’s request for an update on such efforts, but Lowan MP, Hugh Delahunty, has repeated assurances that the Minister was “working hard”.

Last week the battle cries changed to that of defeat.

“It’s disappointing when these things are lost,” Mr Delahunty said.

“There was some good skills built up and it’s disappointing for the staff and the people involved.”

Wannon MP, Dan Tehan said he would continue to rally colleagues to get the centre “up and running”, should Australians vote in a Liberal Government, at this year’s federal election.

Western District Health Service (WDHS) chief executive, Jim Fletcher said the fight for funding wasn’t over but that the centre didn’t have long.

“I think we’ve got a window of opportunity in the next six months – after that it’s going to become extremely difficult,” he said.

“The centre is too valuable a resource to lose and its track record speaks for itself.

“Someone’s got to stand up and take some leadership.” Steering clear of the political mess, founding director, Susan Brumby, has maintained focus on the centre’s objectives.

“You ask any farmer how many people he knows that have died prematurely from a preventable accident or disease and every one will hold up two hands,” Ms Brumby said.

“My hope is that one day they’ll hold up one finger.”