

Cleaning up country living

Farm productivity is inextricably linked to the health and wellbeing of the people who operate the business. The Sustainable Farm Families project in south-eastern Australia is working on improving the fortunes of both.

The healthy country lifestyle is a misnomer, according to a growing number of statistics that prove otherwise. Figures from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare indicate that people in rural communities have above-average rates of heart disease, cancer, suicide and workplace injuries.

Male farmers, in particular, have a 40% chance of a shorter lifespan than the general male population, with the young male suicide rate 27% higher on farms than the national average.

A three-year research project in south-east Australia is working to arrest these trends.

The Sustainable Farm Families research project is led by the Western District Health Service, Hamilton, Victoria, and funded by the Farm Health and Safety Joint Research Venture, which is a partnership between several research and development corporations, including Meat and Livestock Australia, and managed by the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation.

Monitoring health

The pilot project involves 127 men and women from farming properties throughout Victoria, South Australia and southern New South Wales, who agree to monitor their health and make lifestyle changes to improve their wellbeing.

They have also agreed to a one-on-one assessment and participate in



Men's health educator Stu Wilder takes Sustainable Farming Families project participants on a supermarket tour to learn how to read product labels.

annual workshops and discussions over the three years.

The project's principal investigator, health educator Sue Brumby, said "the initiative aimed to empower people to take responsibility for their family's health and wellbeing as a business priority, as well as a personal priority".

"By encouraging the participants to be more proactive about their family's health and therefore the farm business we hope to reduce injuries and premature deaths in farming families and subsequently enable farmers to manage their

properties more productively for longer," Sue said.

Pressures of modern living

For many participants, the pressures of life in the new millennium have caught up with the farming sector, with reports of increased stress, limited time for personal pursuits and less physical activity due to advances in technology.

Other pressures identified include living at work on the farm, lack of time off and the erosion of the social foundation of rural Australia as rural populations diminish.

The Sustainable Farming Families program aims to address these factors by working with individual participants and in groups, to generate change and build capacity in rural communities.

Although the project has only just reached the half-way mark, it is already delivering results.

Participants are making significant lifestyle changes, such as losing weight, improving family relationships, having moles removed, reducing stress and exercising more. Some participants have even discovered significant health risks, which would have gone undiagnosed had they not been involved in the project.

Sue said most people had a good knowledge base about health issues but there were worrying gaps.

"For instance, people know that being obese increases the risk for cardiovascular disease, but they are not aware of the role of stress in heightening that concern," she said.

"The program also helps people to have a better understanding of the types of food they are consuming with the aid of a supermarket tour to teach people about product labelling and what it all means."

The project also encourages participants to respond to health concerns and improve their attendance at their local doctor. [TBC>](#)

10 tips for better health and better farms:

1. Make allowances in your work for possible sick days.
2. Take time to relax each day.
3. Take a minimum two-week holiday away from the farm each year.
4. Participate in physical exercise five times per week.
5. Have a yearly checkup with your doctor.
6. Be aware of your family health history.
7. Reduce health risks like weight, cholesterol, blood pressure and stress.
8. Address farm safety.
9. Prevention is better than cure.
10. Laugh often!

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Sue's colleague, principal researcher and men's health educator Stu Wilder, said the tyranny of distance, a lack of time and the 'stoic' country culture often prevented people from going to the doctor.

"People really need to be more aware of their family history to identify any health risks and to be more proactive about preventing disease and injury in partnership with their health providers," he said.

Part of the success of the program has been to involve a wide range of

family members, including parents, children, grandchildren and in-laws. Stu said many of the younger generation had a different view of health and wellbeing to their parents.

"The younger people are the ones who are going to make the changes," he said.

"They view occupational health and safety as part of the business, not only for their future, but the future of their children as well."

The challenge for the second half of the Sustainable Farming Families

project is to refine and enhance the outcomes and make it repeatable and transferable into the health systems across Australia.

"We have been overwhelmed by the support the project has received from the rural industry, government and the community — people are lining up to be included in another program," Sue said.

More information

- Sue Brumby
Western District Health Service
Ph: (03) 5551 8460
Email: susan.brumby@wdhs.net