

# Fears for diabetes 'tsunami'

By TERRY SIM

**A** TSUNAMI of diabetes could be about to hit Australia's farmers.

Preliminary research results released at the launch of the National Centre for Farmer Health in Hamilton last week indicated one in three farmers tested had abnormal blood glucose levels, putting them at higher risk of diabetes.

Centre director and clinical associate professor Susan Brumby said 33 per cent of 1791 farmers tested in the centre's Sustainable Farm Families program had raised fasting blood glucose levels.

She said less physical activity by farmers might be affecting their health and body weight. Abnormal glucose was also more common as people aged and many farmers kept working until well past their retirement age.

The statistics prompted Diabetes Australia Victoria programs and services director Dr Ralph Audehm to say the farming sector was at risk of a tsunami of diabetes. The blood glucose figures did not include people with diabetes or those pregnant.

"We often talk about a tsunami of diabetes as it is, but 33 per cent

(elevated blood glucose) in farmers - that's huge, that's one-in-three," Dr Audehm said.

"As a general rule we say one in four Australians either have diabetes or are at risk.

"If that 33pc is a representative sample of farmers, you are looking at the incidence of pre-diabetes in farmers being double that of the general population - that's huge.

Dr Audehm said the health of farmers had never been studied as a group before, but they were clearly important to Australia.

"If you look at the key role that farmers play in the health of Australia, if we are talking about a whole workforce that is going to be retiring early or unable to produce we are going to have some significant issues.

"Without a sustainable farming community we are going to be in all sorts of trouble.

"We know also there are other influences on the development of diabetes like stress and depression.

"We are in one of the longest droughts I understand - that level

of stress is obviously having an impact on farmers."

Dr Audehm said if society wanted to maintain its' farming communities, it would have to work with farmers to keep them healthy.

"If people develop diabetes the ability to participate in the workforce actually does go down," he said.

"I know for a fact that many farmers keep working until well past their retirement age.

"If they've got diabetes that may not be possible."

Ms Brumby (pictured) said the blood glucose levels of farmers were above Victorian expectations.

"It is quite possible the most stressed farmers were the most productive and you could keep that up for a few years but you can't keep it up for ever."

Ms Brumby said the issues around farmers gaining access to health services included lack of bulk billing, the "financial squeeze", travel and medical test costs, and time to attend appointments and programs.



Ms Brumby said the farmer health sector needed to access a bigger part of available research monies, she said.

"We need to challenge what research is going on about farmer health."

The new National Centre for Farmer Health is a partnership between Deakin University and the Western District Health Service, supported by \$3.4 million from the Future Farming Strategy and the Handbury Trust.

Ms Brumby said the centre was developing a post-graduate unit on Agricultural Health and Medicine to be run from February 2010 at the Deakin University's Warrnambool campus.

"Someone made the comment that we need to be up there like the Cancer Council, National Heart Foundation," she said.

"One of the reasons Australia has managed to keep itself out of the global financial crisis is because of our high amount of agricultural exports."

But Ms Brumby said farmers' tendency to not complain about their health was costing them.

"It's costing on a personal level and as Australia moves forward the health of the agricultural workforce is pivotal."