



**Shared experience:** Farmers and Seymour nurses learned much from each other during a two-day workshop aimed at improving the wellbeing of farm families.

# Farmer health check

A farmer taking part in a local two-day health and wellbeing workshop ended up in hospital after recognising the signs of health concerns presented on the opening day.

Diagnosed with hypertension, the farmer visited a doctor after learning that some symptoms he had been experiencing could lead to stroke or heart attack, Seymour District Memorial Hospital community services director Louise Sharkey said.

The information the farmer heard came during the opening day of the Sustainable Farm Families workshop on Thursday, and his response underscores the feature of the program delivery, Ms Sharkey said.

Sustainable Farm Families is an award-winning initiative of Western District Health Services, Hamilton, and aims to improve the physical and mental health of Victorian farm families, who are facing the stresses of running a farm during an extended drought.

The program at Seymour District Memorial Hospital attracted 16 participants from the region and as far as Ocean Grove.

Ms Sharkey said many participants were also referred for further testing and support.

She said farmers commented that

they put their health needs secondary to everything else, and this program allowed the focus to be centred on them as individuals.

Likewise, Ms Sharkey said, the workshop also proved valuable for the nurses, some of whom had little knowledge about the stresses of today's farming family.

"Given the farming community coverage of the Seymour district, we felt, as part of our organisational health promotion activity within the Community Services division, that this program was essential and needed to be delivered," Ms Sharkey said.

Community Services nurses ran the program in conjunction with Western District Health Services (Hamilton), the Department of Primary Industries and Agri West.

The program covered full health checks, including cholesterol, blood glucose/pressure monitoring, weight, body fat and mass calculations, skin checks and eyesight checks.

There also were focus group discussions on healthy eating and nutrition (including a supermarket visit), farm health and safety, cancer, cardiovascular disease, stress and relaxation and gender-specific health-related discussions.

Among the participants were Tom and Lisa Newton, who run a sheep and cattle farm in Avenel.

"Farm living is a very stressful life," Mrs Newton said.

"And, when you're stressed, you don't see things very clearly."

She and her husband learned about stress management and hoped the success of this program, and the issues highlighted, would help send a message to State Government leaders in Melbourne that more services were needed.

"I'm here to find out a little bit more about our rural health issues," Mr Newton said.

John Whitehurst and his wife travelled from Melton, with a friend from Ocean Grove.

Mr Whitehurst said the workshop was worth the journey, as it opened his mind to different thoughts and raised health issues he had not realised.

Seymour nurses Karen Richards and Sarah Bayes co-ordinated and planned the event over the past few months, after attending training sessions in Hamilton and Benalla.

They delivered some of the sessions with input from Western District staff member Adam Taylor and DPI representative Fiona Baker.