

Disbelief at centre closure

DANIELLE GRINDLAY

ACADEMICS and health professionals have expressed disappointment at the end of a Hamilton health centre, highlighting its success in changing the lives of Australian farmers.

The National Centre for Farmer Health (NCFH) will run its final 'Sustainable Farm Families' (SFF) program, in Wooroonook next month, unable to continue without Government funding.

University of Ballarat lecturer, Andrew Smith, was trained by the centre to deliver the first SFF programs in 2003; he will also deliver its last.

From the canefields of Queensland to the Wheatbelt of Western Australia, and many places in between, the program has been delivered in every state of the country.

Mr Smith said the training had changed his approach to rural health – lessons he now passes on to his university students.

"It's changing the culture of farmers, but it is changing nurses and health professionals as well," Mr Smith said.

"There's going to be an enormous hole because the program was making so much headway.

"It shows that, by working alongside farmers and giving them the resources they need, they will make the changes needed."

Mr Smith said the program had started "spinning plates", but continued support was necessary to address the disturbing health statistics in farming communities.

"You can't just put in all of this and then stop," he said.

"They have to keep going back to keep the plates turning."

Alpine Health nurse, Alison Hescocock, has been involved in the delivery of SFF workshops for eight years.

Ms Hescocock runs her own farm and said there was no justification for the premature death and disease amongst her peers.

Elevated risks of suicide, chronic disease, death, obesity and accidental death has not stopped Ms Hescocock from encouraging her two children to embrace the farming lifestyle.

"This program makes farmers start valuing their health as a crucial part of their farming enterprise," she said.

"One of the most common responses is that they actually take a family holiday."

"I have not had a farmer come to a workshop and not left with something they've gained."

Ms Hescocock said the program's reach had been cut too short, with a huge number of farmers yet to make crucial changes to their practices.

"There are so many benefits to farming and you can do things safely," she said.

"I'm not sure how many farmers there are in Victoria but I know we haven't got the majority of them."

The NCFH continues to lobby for State and Federal Government funding, but staff numbers have been reduced to five and funding for existing programs and research has run dry.

Founding director, Sue Brunby said it was a tragedy that the centre's work would cease in such a crucial time in Australian farming.

Ms Brunby said much of the country was still recovering from decades of drought and needed support in order to survive.

"We've spent all this time and energy building capacity and skill for a world's best program, in the agricultural hub of Hamilton, and we're not funded," she said.

"This is it; there are no more programs. It's hard to believe."



THE end of change ... NCFH registered nurse, Adrian Calvano, founding director Susan Brunby and research assistant, Heidi Mason, collaborate with National Acoustics Laboratory doctor Warwick Williams on curbing hearing loss in Australian farmers; research that might benefit farmers overseas, but will not be rolled out in Australia due to a lack of government funding. SUPPLIED

Canadian centre lives on

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Mr Fletcher said it was "quite ironic" that a program designed for Australian farmers was destined for support overseas.

"On one hand we should be extremely proud of that," he said.

"On the other side of the coin it's extremely

disappointing that we can't obtain funding from Victoria and the Commonwealth.

"When you've got a leading program like that, you would think it would be a priority."

Centre founding director, Sue Brunby, is dumbfounded at the lack of Australian support.

"New Zealand has already visited, Canada is learning from us, we're recognised for world's

best practice – what's the blockage?" she said.

"Our farmers are facing some tough challenges in the next few years yet, everywhere you turn, more and more services are being reduced or cut because of funding issues."

The Canadian delegates will visit the centre next week and the last workshop will be delivered in Wooroonook next month.

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