

# Farmers need to be sun smart

**REX MARTINICH**

HAMILTON'S National Centre for Farmer Health has started a research program to help prevent deaths and major medical issues caused by skin cancers in the agricultural workforce.

Ochre Health GP, Dr Christel Smit-Kroner, aims to stop many farmers from "learning the hard way" about being sun smart through painful and sometimes fatal melanomas.

For some farmers, the damage may have already been done through exposure to UV radiation during work and play in the years before the danger was known.

"We know that farmers are more likely to get dangerous melanomas than the general population so there is definitely the need for that awareness, just that extra bit of protection and early detection," she said.

"All the generations of farmers are really quite worried because they say they grew up sunbathing on the beach, putting coconut oil on their body and getting sunburnt during summer after summer after summer. They are worried now they are aged 55 or 60 that this is going to catch up with them."

Dr Smit-Kroner usually works in Barham but is spending time in Hamilton because she completed a course at the Farmer Health Centre and "it's really the hub for farmer health and safety".

Dr Smit-Kroner believes the key to reducing the rates of skin cancer in farmers is to figure out how to engage with them about the dangers.

"In my work as a GP I have come across a lot of farmers with skin cancer so that sort of sparked my interest," she said.



OCHRE Health GP, Dr Christel Smit-Kroner, who is running a study into farmers' attitudes to sun exposure and skin checks for early signs of skin cancer at Hamilton's National Centre for Farmer Health. Photo: JUDY DE MAN.

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"There is definitely a need to find out how farmers go with skin protection, because we know the 'Slip Slop Slap' campaign, with the dancing seagull and the schoolchildren on the beach, but what is that to farmers?"

She has already interviewed farmers about their approach to sun exposure and is collating their accounts to help develop an engagement strategy.

In the busy world of farming, some compromises may have to be made to achieve an overall higher level of sun smart awareness.

"Farmers don't like to be told what to do but I think most farmers will do a couple of things pretty OK, it's just a good idea if they got a bit better at it," she said.

"Some will say 'I get a

headache from wearing a hat'.

"I'm not here to say they have to put a hat on anyway, if it's not something that suits them but to make sure they are good at all the other (sun smart precautions)."

Prevention of primary exposure to solar radiation is being matched with attempts to get farmers to book regular skin checks in order to receive early treatment for abnormalities.

"One of the things that came out of these conversations is that rarely do farmers get skin checks offered to them by GPs," she said.

"We need to look at our profession as GPs and say 'why not?'"

"Early detection is a part of many cancer programs; why is it not part of skin cancers ones?"