

Farmers and skin protection: not a perfect marriage

Rural GPs deal with skin cancer every day and, in collaboration with the National Centre for Farmer Health and Deakin University, Christel Smit led a team of researchers looking into the attitude of farmers towards skin protection from sun damage and found some alarming statistics.

Dr Smit discovered despite decades of slip, slop, slap Australian farmers were not getting the message but had high skin cancer rates.

Recently in the Riverina area a study was done where farmers were invited to join a roundtable discussion about skin protection.

Australia has the world's highest rate of skin cancers and farmers are five to 10 times more exposed to UV radiation than indoor workers.

When looking at the available statistics about 75 per cent of farmers will say they wear a broad-rim hat, about 75 per cent report wearing long trousers, 27 per cent will be wearing long sleeves and 48 per cent say they never wear sunscreen.

Why are these statistics not better after 35 years of hammering home the Slip, Slop, Slap, Seek and Slide campaigns?

Most of the things farmers do well is because they are in it for another reason.

For instance with sunglasses; they are not worn for eye protection but for reducing glare and getting fewer headaches at the end of the day.

Long trousers are worn because they protect the legs in sheepyards, on motorbikes, horses and when working with hay.

Avoiding the midday sun is aimed more at avoiding heat stroke rather than avoiding UV radiation.

The rest is considered a nuisance, a hassle, too hot and an inconvenience.

It seems the more practical skin protection can be made, the more likely farmers will use it.

Here is where it gets interesting though, because at some stage when a farmer gets an experience with his or her first skin cancer the opinion changes a lot.

They apply sunscreen, wear their hats and are probably more likely to wear long sleeves.

So farmers tend to learn about skin protection the hard way.

During the conversations sunscreen was discussed frequently.

It is unlikely to be applied often enough.

Most farmers say they apply it once in the morning, some reapply at lunch time, but the two-hourly strategy suggested by SunSmart is impractical — and farmers also find it sticky and greasy.

Farmers also tend to gauge the level of UV exposure by how hot it is, which is a mistake.

We cannot feel radiation on our skin as heat.

Farmers of 55 and over also comment they grew up not knowing about the harmful effects of the sun and can remember vividly getting sunburnt summer after summer — and now they are concerned.

They feel the younger generation will do better because they are taught in school about SunSmart strategies.



Dr Christel Smit

Dr Christel Smit

Dr Smit studied medicine in the Netherlands and holds a degree in tropical medicine.

She moved in 2006 to Northern NSW and worked as a GP in broadacre farming country.

In 2010, she relocated to Barham and, while working towards a GP fellowship, studied for a post grad certificate in farmer health and safety.

She said her close daily connection with skin cancer and natural interest in farmer health led her to research how to help improve prevention of skin cancers in farmers.

The way forward would be first of all to get farmers to check the daily UV index along with the weather forecast.

It will help them understand that also on a not-very-hot day, slightly overcast day and while near water, the UV index can be higher than anticipated.

When it gets above 3 it's time to start protecting your skin.

Secondly we can do much more along the lines of getting good UV protective clothing.

There are ways to add UV filters to your washing machine and add protection to your favorite shirt, or even consider the SPF rated shirts from fishing shops.

The right long sleeve shirt doesn't have to be too hot.

In general farmers are encouraged to look at what they already do to protect the skin, and then think of ways to be better.

I know farmers don't like being told what to do, so I won't, just do what you do, and get on with it.

And last but not least, farmers from the age of 50 should have a yearly full body skin check by a GP who is specially trained to do these, or a specialist.

Councillors agree on review

All four Campaspe Shire councillors present at last Tuesday's council meeting were vocal in their support of the recommendation to endorse the Rural Road Review community engagement plan.

Mayor Ian Maddison said it was important the community was involved in the process.

"A lot of these roads were built 200 years ago for horse and cart," he said.

"Times have changed . . . and we need to reflect that.

"That's why it is so important to get out into the community and talk to them."

Cr Neil Pankhurst said he was happy to support the recommendation as the community was an "integral part" to the process.

"Council has put significant time and

resources into completing the review," he said.

"Now we are moving into implementing it and network better to find out what the community needs."

Cr Paul Jarman said the project was "significantly the largest asset class in terms of cost and maintenance".

"The road network we have inherited is not necessarily what is required," he said.

Cr Leigh Wilson said now council needed the "broader rural community to come along with us" and Cr Carol Howell said it was important the community "understands what we're on about and hopefully they approve".

Cr Pankhurst also praised the work of Jon Aujard, who had done much of the project's earlier work.

PAUL WELLER MP MEMBER FOR RODNEY

Echuca/Moama

Thank you and Farewell

With a month remaining until the Victorian State Election, the time has come for me to bid a final farewell to the wonderful people of the Rodney electorate.

It has been an absolute honour and privilege to represent the men, women and children of this magnificent region in the Victorian parliament for the past eight years.

I have relished the opportunity to listen, to advocate, to contribute and provide a strong voice for our community and I am enormously thankful to have been able to experience this extraordinary civic role.

It has been an eventful eight years - not without its opportunities and challenges - but I am extremely proud of all we have achieved.

We plugged the north south pipeline, we built 12 new fire stations, we returned harness racing to Gunbower, and we are extending natural gas to Heathcote and Nathalia.

In Echuca we are building a new hospital, a new police station, and will soon see preliminary works commence on a new bridge.

We also spent almost \$9 million on the Port of Echuca redevelopment, built a new SES station, and invested half a million dollars in our new library.

On top of that, we are not far away from securing a new combined primary school for Echuca west, south and specialist schools and a new fire station.

Following the state election on Saturday November 29, the seat of Rodney will be abolished and the new rural electorates of Murray Plains, Euroa, Shepparton and Bendigo East will serve the wonderful people of this area.

We have been fortunate in the 158-year history of the Rodney electorate to be represented by strong and committed members of parliament who have provided outstanding representation to their rural constituency and I am certain that will continue in the future.

Thank you and farewell,

Paul Weller

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Outgoing Member for Rodney

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