

# Taking strides to improve farmer health and wellbeing

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FARMER health is different. It faces specific issues and challenges that are not experienced by other sectors of the population. For Dr Sue Brumby, Director for the National Centre for Farmer Health (NCFH) if we are to address health differences and outcomes faced by farming families and communities, it's important to recognise there are specific risks that are higher in farming populations.

It's concerning that urban-centric health programs are failing to hit the mark in regional and rural communities.

"I think people just presume that farmers as a group are all healthy, strong, jolly and resilient people on the farm with a fresh outdoor lifestyle and plenty of physical activity," she said.

"As a health profession I don't think our knowledge of farming and agricultural practices has kept up with our health knowledge," Sue reflected.

Research is showing a high rate of obesity in farming populations today, with mechanisation inhibiting fit, active and healthy options.

"People tend to be sitting and sedentary," Sue said.

"Partners working off farm often travel long distances to work places because jobs are no longer available in shrinking local communities.

"Children on farm can also have difficulties with after school activities due to distance travelled if not able to come home on the bus."

And to reach health services, farmers are often required to travel vast distances.

"When delivering our Sustainable Farm Families (SFF) program across Australia we heard of an instance where people travelled 600 kilometres to reach medical services, only to find when they got there, their referral hadn't arrived and they needed to return again in two weeks' time. It's crazy and who bears the cost?" Sue asked with frustration.

"From a health service perspective, it's important for people to ask how we can minimise the number of visits and time needed without compromising the quality of the service given."

The work environment for most workers and professionals usually involves the company of colleagues, but farms today tend to employ less people, so farmers often work alone, in areas that don't always have reliable mobile reception. There is often no-one else on the farm during the day.

This is serious when considering that in the last two years, farming has had the highest rate per capita of workplace deaths.

"We've been trying to get accurate statistics on the actual rate of suicides amongst farming populations but with the latest accurate National data coming from 1998, it's almost impossible," Sue said.

"Then there's added considerations for farmers, such as the time of year and the demands on the farm. If surgery is required, farmers don't get paid sick leave and usually don't have a ready replacement on hand. Family and extended family are left to pick up the challenges."

In rural communities there is considerable overlap between family, business and the environment. When farmers live, love, work and play all in the same place, it can be very difficult to escape.

"If you decide to leave that environment, not only are you changing where you live, but where you work as well, which is extremely stressful," Sue explained.

These factors specific to farming families lay behind the Sustainable Farm Families (SFF) program which worked with farm men and women to address their health, wellbeing and safety in a farming context.

Additionally they also uncovered serious knowledge and skills gaps in rural health and with agricultural professionals working in farming communities.

This awareness led to the birth of the National Centre for Farmer Health (NCFH) in Hamilton in 2008 with the original vision of ..... 'inspiring quality education, research and service delivery through innovative partnerships that advance agrihealth locally and globally.'

The centre was funded through the Geoff and Helen Handbury Trust and the Victorian government through the Future Farming Strategy. It is also a partnership between Western District Service and Deakin University.

In October 2010 the Opening the Gates of Farmer Health conference was held in Hamilton with over 165 delegates.

In 2012 the second biannual conference was held in Hamilton and lent it's title 'Sowing the Seeds of Farmer Health' to a book launched with a selection of the conference proceedings, at the end of 2014.

This self-funded book is a snapshot of some of the specific issues facing farming populations, making recommendations for improvements, and was put together by the collaboration of 30 different authors, photographers and editors.

Sue Brumby explained there were no Australian books about farmer health in existence and very few internationally.

"There was a gaping big hole in our knowledge and evidence," she said.

Each paper outlined in the book was extensively peer reviewed and some of the subjects covered include the impact of climate on farmer health and wellbeing, stress, rural financial counselling, drugs and alcohol, assessing mental health and when to make decisions about leaving the farm.

"Some of the processes people go through are put under the

spotlight, as well as the cost of health services and transport and all those invisible costs farmers bear that we don't even think about," Sue said.

She believes publishing a book on the specific issues facing farming families and communities also gives people working with farmers, like bankers, accountants, DEPI facilitators, vets, government policy and others working with agricultural groups, an increased awareness.

"We need to ask how we can incorporate health, wellbeing and safety into discussions about what makes the farm successful," Sue explained.

"It's about awareness."

For Sue it was satisfying that 'Sowing the Seeds of Farmer Health' was published by VURRN Press, The Victorian Universities Regional Research Network Press, and printed in Maryborough.

"There are not many regional printing houses still printing books so we were keen to give our support. It was a thrill that Associate Professor Jerry Courvisanos, the General Editor of Vurrn Press, attended the successful book launch," Sue said.

"We've sold six books on line just this week, including one to Sweden and we've even had an inquiry from Ireland."

For Sue, with her dedicated community support ethos, part of the satisfaction about the production of 'Sowing the Seeds of Farmer Health' comes from the benefits for Hamilton.

"First people attended conferences herein Hamilton; now a book with an ISBN number has been produced out of the National Centre for Farmer Health in Hamilton and can be bought on-line.

"It's fantastic."

Now thoughts are turning to the running of Hamilton's next Farmer Health conference, perhaps followed by the publication of a second book.

"This kind of project not only provides a conference record, but will grow researchers, develop and give a platform to the skills and writing talents of contributors, and give a voice to people starting to work in this space," Sue explained.

"So apart from addressing farmer health, wellbeing and safety, and adding to the literature, it also brings other people along to keep the momentum going," Sue reflected.

For the meantime, momentum will be kept going with the next award winning Agricultural Health and Medicine course to be held in Hamilton from February 23-27, 2015.

"It's the only one held in Australia and gives 25 participants incredible insights into the extraordinary challenges faced by people in regional and rural Australia. There are only three spots left," Sue said.

For inquiries call 03-55518533 or visit online at [www.farmerhealth.org.au](http://www.farmerhealth.org.au)