

# SAFETY SCIENCE

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## **CULTURAL CHANGE ON THE FARM**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The rate of morbidity and mortality to farmers and members of their family has been increasing over the past decade (Victorian WorkCover Authority, 1997). Despite the increased drive of safety awareness by government and health agencies, farmers continue to risk injury and death through their work practices. In Victoria, farmers have the highest rate of death compared with all other industry groups, including mining and construction (Victorian WorkCover Authority, 1997).

Outside of farming, there have been dramatic environmental changes within the industry, without directing change to individual behaviour (Wigglesworth, 1995). There appears to be a difference in attitude to safety by farmers and a culture of risk taking practices that is not accepted in the work practices of the manufacturing, mining and construction industries. This issue is exacerbated with farm related injury of males far exceeding injuries to women and children.

Occupational safety is largely dependent upon the working environment and work practices (behaviour) of employers and employees. This in turn impacts on the frequency and degree of exposure to risk. Reducing risk through environmental change has been successful in reducing injuries on industry worksites. However, unlike other industry, the farming environment cannot be easily changed. A reduction of injury and death to farmers, their family and their employees may come about through change to the culture of safety by those living and working on the farm.

### **SAFETY - A PROCESS OF CULTURAL CHANGE**

The injury to farmers is one of great concern and is exacerbated by a number of factors including isolation, age of farmers, social factors, attitude, time, cost, and design of equipment. Social factors contribute to the incidence of injury. In particular, time pressures, money, seasonal rush, inconvenience, lack of training, poor organisation and carelessness (Day, 1995).

Farming as an industry is unlike any other. More often than not the farm is a work place as well as a home. The work place often contains industrial machinery and chemicals, which are easily accessible to family members. To compound this issue, farming is not always a systemised process of work. Farmers can at times work in isolation. Other times farming can involve the entire family. All members of the family, including children may be required to provide work assistance, particularly in seasonally busy times. Farmers often work in isolation, and may be working with machinery for hours on end without any form of surveillance. Farming as an industry, is required by law to have regulatory procedures in place to ensure safety. These procedures, in many cases, are not complied with by farmers, contractors and employees.

*“The need to understand the obligations of the duty of care which employers owe to employees is vital. Victoria has recently moved to rely upon performance based OH&S legislation, aspects of which require self-employed persons to meet onerous and complex obligations. Compliance with the law in such a framework involves the application of a general duty of care to ensure that a safe place of work and safe systems of work for all employees is maintained, including for contractors as deemed employees.” (Calver, 1997, p.6).*

The issue of safe farm practices through strict government regulation has been difficult to enforce in the farming sector. This in part is due to the physical isolation of farms and the promotion of self-regulation. There is some evidence of the ineffectiveness of law as a tool to motivate change of risk taking behaviours and as a guide towards encouraging compliance to safety regulations (Wilde, 1994). Therefore, risk management is more often dependent upon the farmer accepting the importance of safe work practices and to undertake self-regulation. A change in culture of safety by farmers is essential for the reduction of morbidity and mortality within the industry.

What has been lacking is a strategy to make safety an issue of priority among farmers and their families. In other words, there is infrequent outrage by farmers on the high rate of morbidity and mortality. This evidence is supported through Sandman’s (1993) study of “outrage” as a component of risk, whereby the public is more likely to overestimate risk when outrage is high and underestimate risk when outrage is low.

Within the ‘no-blame’ structure of the ‘ergonomics approach to injury prevention’, (Wigglesworth, 1995), the missing stimulus for injury prevention is the “outrage” component or the desire to undertake action to create a safe working environment and work practices. If the stimulus “can be located and modified, the risk of further error and hence, of injury or damage can be reduced”. (Wigglesworth, 1995, p41).

The acceptance of safe work practices is based upon farmer’s perception of risk (Slovic, 1987). Therefore the degree of ‘outrage’ is dependent upon the farmer’s perception of risk. The manner in which a farmer responds to a risk situation will depend on the extent to which that farmer perceives something to be a risk. There is evidence which demonstrates that farmers from different commodity groups perceive risks differently. There are a number of components contributing to farmers perception of risk. These components include:

- the likelihood of injury;
- ease of hazard controllability;
- financial consequences and
- the potential to impart hazards on other people on the farm.

Perception of a hazard by farmers correlates directly with their willingness to take preventative action. (Sandall & Reeve, 1997).

### **Farmsafe Alliance - A strategy to change the culture of safety on the farm**

The primary purpose of a Victorian Farmsafe Alliance is to involve all key stakeholders of farm injury prevention in a process of collaboration. The Alliance provides the framework for this collaboration to exist without direct ownership by any one organisation or institution.

Farmsafe Victoria, a Committee of the Victorian Farmers Federation proposed the concept of a Farmsafe Alliance in which all key stakeholders from the grass roots through to the halls of government are involved. Farmsafe Victoria is essentially an alliance of community and government groups with an interest in improving the quality of rural life by reducing farm accidents and injuries as well as assisting to reduce the economic loss associated with accidents and injuries. In addition to four farmer representatives, a representative from each of the following organisations sits on the Committee:

- Victorian Farmers Federation
- Victorian WorkCover Authority (2 representatives)
- Agriculture Victoria
- Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service

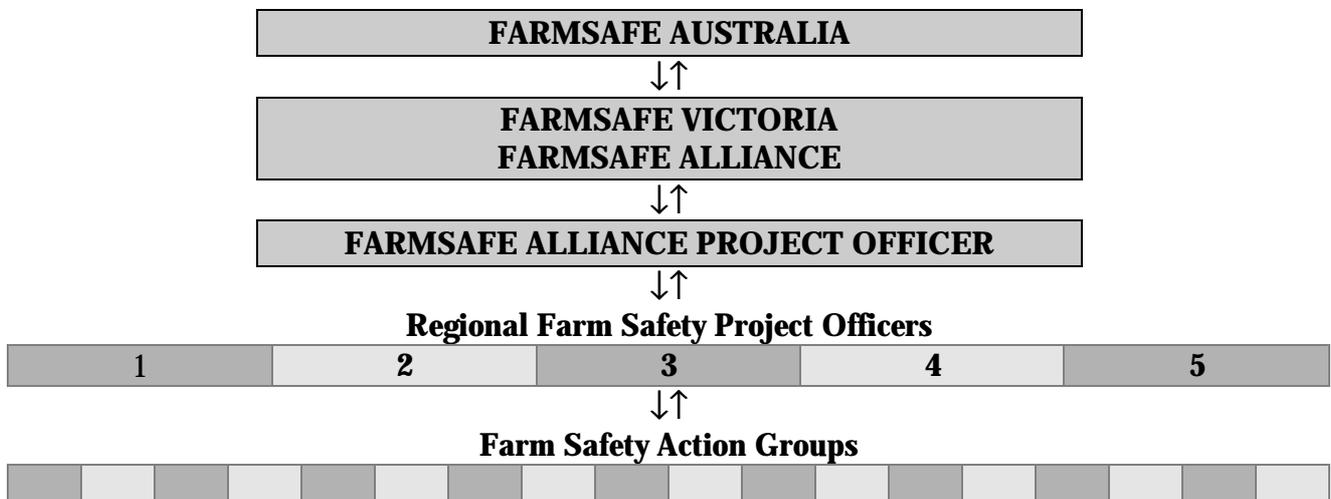
- Divisions of General Practice
- Monash University Accident Research Centre
- Australian Workers Union
- Women in Agriculture
- Victorian Department of Health and Community Services
- Kidsafe Victoria

The Farmsafe Alliance was launched in April 1997 as a non-allied body to support an intersectoral approach to farm injury prevention. The Farmsafe Alliance is an opportunity for all key stakeholders of farm injury prevention to work collaboratively towards assisting farmers and their families to prevent injury and death in their work and home environment. Recommendations from the Farmsafe Alliance will tie in with strategies developed by Farmsafe Australia and encourage their further development.

An intersectoral approach to injury prevention is viewed by government organisations and chief funding bodies as the ideal strategy to most effectively use resources. There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that many of the key stakeholders of farm injury prevention are becoming increasingly frustrated with the division of these resources and the isolation in which they are being used. An Alliance approach allows for a broader investment in community safety as well as a greater chance of cooperation in injury prevention strategies and their implementation.

The Alliance targets an approach to reduce the rate of injury to farmers both within and outside the boundaries of government regulation. The Victorian WorkCover Authority (VWA), the Victorian Farmers Federation (VFF), the Australian Agricultural Health Unit (AAHU) and associated health professionals have been active in their approach to educate farmers in injury prevention work practices. Farm Safety Action Groups have been formed, farm safety days and farm safety walks have been held, and farm safety information has been promoted through newspapers, newsletters and magazines.

The strategic plan for farm safety, as set out by Farmsafe Victoria:



The top-down approach of Farmsafe Australia and the Farmsafe Alliance (Victoria) is supported by a bottom-up approach. This involves the development and support of 18 Farm Safety Action Groups (FSAGs) by December 1998. Currently there are 9 FSAGs in Victoria with the single purpose of involving the farming community in injury prevention interventions. The proposed model is set out above. It is anticipated that farm safety strategies will be directed through the Farm Safety Action Groups as it is injury prevention action by the farmers and their families that is paramount to the reduction in injury and death on farms.

In order to change the culture of safety on farms, the components contributing to farmers perception of risk (as indicated earlier) must be addressed. In other words, strategies should be developed collaboratively to target farmers perception of risk. These components include:

- the likelihood of injury - readdressing misinformation within the culture;
- ease of hazard controllability - allowing farmers to make changes on their own farms;
- financial consequences - encouraging farm safety as a business management strategy, and
- the potential to impart hazards on other people on the farm - informing farmers of their legal responsibilities to employees, visitors and themselves.

The following issues have been identified that are supported by the Victorian Farmsafe Alliance:

- farming community and local rural communities, including health professional, educators and service groups must take ownership of farm safety;
- risk taking behaviour of farmers requires further research in order to establish successful strategies to address change;
- further data collection is a priority at a local and national level to provide further insight into the nature of farm injuries.

*“Farmsafe Victoria notes that a principal recommendation of the Industry Commission in its comprehensive review of occupational health and safety was for the deficiencies in the data available about occupational health and safety to be improved as a matter of urgency.” (Calver, 1997, p7).*

## **SUMMARY**

Many of the current occupational health and safety strategies do not succeed because they fail to address the safety culture of farming families. Farming life is a paradox between social connectedness of the rural community and social isolation through environment setting and work practices. It is hypothesised that cultural change of farm safety will come about through farmers having ownership of farm safety through a change in culture that is addressed by a top-down, bottom-up approach. If farmers have a genuine invested interest in safety, through a heightened desire to address safety, they will be more inclined to take action to ensure their own, their families and their employees' safe work practices.

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