RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into cause of fatality and injury on Victorian farms

Horsham – 11 March 2004

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Witness
Ms W. J. Altmann, Community Health Nurse, West Wimmera Health Service (sworn).
The CHAIR — Welcome, everybody. Under the powers conferred on this committee by the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act, this committee is empowered to take all evidence at these hearings on oath or affirmation. I wish to advise all present at these hearings that all evidence taken by this committee, including submissions, is, under the provisions of the Constitution Act, granted immunity from judicial review. I also wish to advise witnesses that any comments made by witnesses outside the committee’s hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege. I welcome also Hugh Delahunty, the local member for Lowan, who has come along and is taking some interest today.

Wendy, for the purposes of the transcript, could you give us your full name and address and tell us whether you are attending in your private capacity or representing an organisation and, if so, in what capacity you are representing it?

Ms ALTMANN — My name is Wendy Altmann. My home address is Tullyvea Road, Jeparit. I am here representing West Wimmera Health Service as a community health nurse.

The CHAIR — Your evidence will be taken down and become public evidence in due course. If you would make a statement for 5 minutes or so, after that we will ask you some questions.

Ms ALTMANN — I have been a community health nurse for about 15, maybe 18, years, initially at Jeparit Hospital, which was a new position. Then when we amalgamated I became a community health nurse at the West Wimmera Health Service, which covers Nhill, Kaniva, Jeparit, Rainbow, Goroke, Natimuk and Cooinda, which is a disability centre.

When I was first employed, we established a community health care group. It was made up of representatives across the community, including the farming sector because it was a large rural area. One of the things that we identified in the early days was that farm safety was an issue, but we were not really sure how we presented farm safety as an issue and how we addressed that. We believed it jeopardised the health of farmers, their children, and often the children who visited farms. So it was an important issue for us. We knew that we could not run a farm safety night and expect farmers to attend. We were fairly realistic and we did have farmers on our committee, so that we knew that that was not possible.

So what we did was organise men’s health nights. We had as the primary focus prostatic or testicular cancer or cardiovascular disease. Then we would slot in something else which may be related to farm safety — maybe machinery safety, back care or even stress, which we think impacts on the health of farmers. We did that up until about 1998.

At that stage I attended a presentation in Daylesford. It was the launching of a men’s health kit but also of a program called Kidsafe on the Farm. It was a program piloted in the Daylesford area and involved children from primary schools in the region taking on-farm walks and having farm hazards identified to them as they were taking that walk. The evaluation undertaken by La Trobe University at that stage indicated that children were taking home the farm safety message and that some farmers were actually committing to change as a result of that.

So as a group we decided that we would adopt that kind of project in our region. We sought some funding from the injury prevention initiative and we ran the program on three local farms in Jeparit, Rainbow and Kaniva during 1998 and 1999. During 2000 we were able to access funding — but it was only up to $750, I think — from the VFF Farmsafe Alliance and we were offered some training as community health nurses across the region on how to organise farm safety days and how to use the farm mat, which is a mat or a model of a farm that we could set up with potential farm hazards. The children walked around the mat and fixed it up so that it was actually a safe farm by the time they were finished.

I was also invited by Vanessa Drendel, who will be appearing later this morning, to attend a farm safety day that she had organised at Netherby Primary School during that year. It was such a success that it prompted us to organise similar sessions at other primary schools throughout the region. Since then, in 2001 we organised a session at Nhill Primary School, which involved three schools and 250 students. In 2002 we had Jeparit, Rainbow, Yaapeet and Netherby primary schools meet together, with 120 students. In 10 days, on the 23rd of this month, we have organised another farm safety day in Goroke, inviting Kaniva and Natimuk primary schools, and there will be 270 students, which is a bit daunting for me, but thankfully we have a great group that helps organise that. In organising those days we have formed farm safety action groups and they had had to change with each venue.
because there are different people involved. This time we have met on probably four occasions and we are meeting again next week. We have community health nurses, the safety officer from the hospital, teachers, farmers, the police, the State Emergency Service and the Country Fire Authority involved.

The issue of transport is always a problem. It is ready hard to organise large programs like that at every school, so we look at a central school and provide transport and fund that transport to the one school. We also provide a barbecue lunch for the kids on the day. I received another $750 from the VFF Farmsafe Alliance, but that really has not been enough this year because of the number of children we needed to transport from Kaniva. So we as a committee sought additional funding from the West Wimmera shire drought recovery committee and it has actually given us another $900 to help with that. We were still short, so I have talked again to David Phillips at the VFF Farmsafe Alliance and he has put in extra dollars so that we have enough to cover the transport. Because our health services are not that keen on putting additional funds into that, we really need to have cost recovery for those programs.

These programs involve setting up different sessions at the school. This year we are setting up eight different sessions. The children are put into groups — I think we have 11 groups — and they are rotated through those groups during the day. We involve farmers. We have farm machinery there, things like field bins, augers, motorbikes, chainsaws and all kinds of things like that, and the protective gear. We have the farm mat, which I will look after. We have someone bringing in farm animals. The children are taught how to feed them, pat them and approach them. The SES, the police, the ambulance and the CFA are involved. The CFA will have a smoke-filled room. So it is not just about farm safety; it is about home safety as well. We are looking at first aid and water safety. Also Greening Australia is involved this year through the Department of Sustainability and Environment.

We are also looking at a form of evaluation for that program. It is very difficult, we know, to evaluate the impact of the day, but we have the support of the teachers. They are going to do some preliminary classroom sessions on farm safety and we are also going to survey the grades 4, 5 and 6 children, I think, post the day and see the impact of that. I guess the barriers that we have encountered are that it is difficult to evaluate. We know that many of the messages get back to the parents — we have heard that from being around in local communities — but we are not necessarily sure that farmers are making a behaviour change. Although when we did the farm walks — and we identified farmers who were willing to take us on, often with lots of children — we would often have the children of the farmers say to us, ‘Oh, Dad just put the lock on the chemical shed last night’. We would do a walk beforehand to make sure it was reasonably safe. We know that at least one farmer made a change; we are not sure about the rest. We thought that was quite positive, anyway.

One of the other expectations, I guess, when we received funding from the Farmsafe Alliance was that we run a Managing Farm Safety program, which was a two-day course. It would have cost the farmer $90 to $150 and it would have been tax deductible, but to take a farmer off a farm for two days to attend a farm safety course, we knew there was just no way that that was going to happen. I guess I got the impression, maybe, that we may not receive funds in the future for farm safety programs for primary school-age children, but we are really not sure about how else we can address the problem. We think the children are the farmers of tomorrow and I guess from experience this has been the best way that we know to address farm safety in our regional area.

I guess the other thing that has come up recently is that the Worksafe issue and the on-farm inspection may be the catalyst for being able to do something more, preparing farmers more for that kind of process. Again I am not sure that we have the time or the expertise to do that, either. That is about it.

The CHAIR — Thanks very much, Wendy. You were talking about children taking the message back to their parents. Do you think they are taking the messages on for themselves as well? We hear about ATVs, for example, and we know that children under 16 are not supposed to ride an ATV, but by the same token we know that they do, from the evidence that we have been given. Do you think they are taking those kinds of safety messages on seriously themselves, as well?

Ms ALTMANN — I think they are. They do, but they also need to have supportive members of family at home. Unless you have got that safety gear there and parents have made a commitment to buy it and have it in place, it is really difficult to determine whether they do. I guess we have heard anecdotal evidence to suggest that farmers have been prompted to make the change, because children have come home from these farm safety days and said, ‘We need a helmet to ride the horse’, or ‘We should be wearing the long gear’, so we do know that there
are some changes, and we believe the children are adopting them and encouraging the parents to adopt them as well.

The CHAIR — Is there any way that you have tried to collect this kind of evidence to be able to show it on paper, and would there be a way that you could be helped to do that? Obviously you are talking about costs, recovery of costs and those sorts of things, but do you have any suggestions about how a government, other political organisations or whatever else can help you or help this happen?

Ms ALTMANN — It does come back to funds, I have no doubt. When we did the farm walks we tried to adopt a similar kind of evaluation that the Daylesford model had, but because they had heaps of money to have it professionally evaluated it was much easier for them. Again, as I was just saying to Kristen, we are meant to be multiskilled in our roles as community health nurses, but we just do not have the time. I believe you would need some funding to support a project officer to do that. We can do a small evaluation, and we are encouraged to do that with our health promotion plans, but we do not have the time or funds to do a large one. It would be wonderful to be able to work with a university or some other large facility that could take that on, but again you would need some financial support.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Do you see the VFF having a role in that as well? Or what other bodies beside — —

Ms ALTMANN — I would hope so. I would hope they do, because I think they are the direct link to the farmers. But I guess I have had a bit of a negative response from them of late. I had a visit from one of the guys from the VFF Farmsafe Alliance. He was not sure that farm safety projects for children was the way to go, but we would welcome some other incentives. If they had some suggestions on how we could do that differently or better, we would welcome them. There needs to be support from them as well.

Mr McQUILTEN — What way did he want to go?

Ms ALTMANN — I guess he was talking about the Worksafe process and the on-site visits that are happening, or apparently are going to happen. He was concerned about preparing farmers for that, but again I am not sure how — —

Mr McQUILTEN — What do you mean by preparing farmers for that’?

Ms ALTMANN — I suppose like the farm safety management courses that they were considering a few years ago. I do not know that they have ever been run, but they have not been run in this region anyway, not from what I can gather.

The CHAIR — What about the kinds of things you are doing here in West Wimmera, and what about the rest of the state? How confident are you that the other community health services are actually doing what you are doing? Obviously you have been talking to other community health services. Do you think it is coordinated or a bit ad hoc?

Ms ALTMANN — I think it is probably ad hoc. We did have a regional coordinator who was, I think, based at Boort at one stage, but I do not think that person is in that position, and if they are we have not had any contact with them. I know that further north, around Ouyen and Murrayville, they have done quite large farm safety programs and they have involved schoolchildren. But around here the Wallup VFF was very active. They were the ones who funded the farm mat program to begin with, and they ran farm safety programs there. That is just near Dimboola. They were active, but I have not heard of much else. Even with the workers I work with, I do not know of anyone who has run — —

I think there was one in Rural North West Health, but there is not a lot happening unfortunately, and obviously we are not a well-coordinated group either.

Mr INGRAM — You talked about the men’s health nights. Were they basically specific nights for people to come together?

Ms ALTMANN — Yes, they were.
Mr INGRAM — I am not too sure if you are aware of it, but in East Gippsland there is a program called Men’s Shed, which tries to get people together and have a bit of a yarn. Do you think the men’s health nights would be better if they were tapping into existing infrastructure? Basically you get farmers together at Landcare and VFF meetings and things like that. They are part of an already established infrastructure. You could go around and say, ‘We are going to have a men’s health night at this meeting, so you could do your normal business and then we will do a men’s health discussion or a farm safety discussion’.

Ms ALTMANN — That is an option. We have DNRE and VFF members on a community health group, and that is something that has been raised, but it is not a huge priority. They are really hard to get together as a group, and they are there to talk about whatever is on the agenda for the VFF, but again it is possibility and something we should pursue. The other difficulty we have with men’s health nights is that it is easier to find speakers in relation to farm safety, but it is very difficult to access GPs to come and talk about prostate and testicular cancer and cardiovascular disease. Even though funding and kits are available, it is difficult to pin them down to attend. It is usually us pinning them down and having a night that suits them rather than the other way around.

Mr INGRAM — Do you find that the same group of people and a small percentage of the community who attend your men’s health nights and all these other meetings?

Ms ALTMANN — Yes, we seem to be preaching to the converted usually. But if we pick up one we always think that is an advantage. If we can pick up someone who we are able to convert, then that is worthwhile.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — We had some speakers near Colac, including the chief executive officer of Colac Otway shire, talk to us about how councils can be involved. His view is that councils should be involved in promulgating the educational message. What role, if any, have any of the shires had with farm safety?

Ms ALTMANN — Very little. At least this time the shire will be aware of what we are doing down in Goroke, because there would be shire representatives on the West Wimmera drought recovery committee who provide us with some funding for this program. And we do always make sure that the program is well publicised in the local newspapers or newsletters that are around so that the community is aware that these things are going on as well. Yes, that is a great idea. I think farm safety should be part of municipal public health plans, but I do not know that it is.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Good idea.

The CHAIR — Wendy, thanks very much for all your proactive work on farm safety. It is great that you have given us your time. You will get a copy of the transcript. Any matters of fact and grammar can be corrected, but no matters of substance. Thank you again.

Witness withdrew.