RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the cause of fatality and injury on Victorian farms

Melbourne – 24 November 2003

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M. Lawrance, (sworn).
The CHAIR – Welcome everybody. Thank you very much for your interest today, from the public and the media's point of view. And also thank you to the witnesses for giving up your time and expertise to come here to give evidence.

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. The committee is a normal parliamentary committee. It is hearing evidence today on the inquiry into the cause of fatality and injury on Victorian farms. All members of the committee are present. I welcome Michael Lawrance.

Mr LAWRANCE – My name is Michael Stephen Lawrance. My address is 911 Ligar Street, Ballarat.

The CHAIR – Thank you, Michael. Are you attending today in a private capacity or representing an organisation?

Mr LAWRANCE – Private capacity.

The CHAIR – During this hearing, your evidence will be taken down and become public evidence in due course. If you would like to make a 10-minute statement, we will then ask questions.

Mr LAWRANCE – I am here in response to an interest in farm injury prevention. My purpose in being here is to contribute to the work that has been going on for a long time in preventing that. I have been involved in farm health and safety for quite a while, the injury prevention and the rehabilitation. I don't have an agenda other than to try to improve that. Because I practice several days, every day of the week basically, with people who are injured on farms, I guess I have some strong views about the need to improve the situation. So in the time I had available I put on paper my thoughts in response to your terms of reference. I will go through some of the key points. I don't have a great presentation or speech to make to you. I am happy to discuss anything that is in there that you want to quiz me about. I have not presented a report here based on a lot of stats and research. They are available. I have been in and around this for long enough to be quite confident of what I am saying. But if you wanted more evidence, it would have taken more than me as a private practitioner can present to you at this time.

I am a bush boy. I have been around farming and industries where there is high injury most of my life until the beginning of the 1990s when I started working as a clinician occupational therapist, occupational rehab and injury prevention. Some thoughts I have – and I tried to be honest rather than be too mealy-mouthing about this – if I can preface briefly. This stuff matters to me. When I was writing this, my daughter came to the door of my office and said, "You know that farmer who got blown off his truck last year" – known to me and other people in this room – he was killed in Ballarat; he had run over his three-year old daughter years ago and killed her in the same farmyard. My daughter, who is a friend of the son, said that the son was killed on Thursday in a head-on crash just south of Ballarat. If that's shock value for you, it is shock value for me, too. I am a little bit nervous in front of such a high-powered committee, and all the rest of it. But to me, that's what we are here for. It is just tragic. So really if I have some things wrong in here, frankly, I don't care because that's the situation we are dealing with and that I am trying to help improve.

Some of the things – and I almost edited some of this out – but I think one of the problems we deal with in health and safety generally, because I work with it inside and outside of agriculture, is that we are dealing with legislation that fits big business better than it fits small business. I employ a couple of people part time. I guess I am a small business. For me, trying to get my head around
various things other than health and safety is very difficult, because I cannot be a computer expert and an occupational therapist, ergonomist and all the rest. I feel that small business people are often up against something that fits big business easier than it fits small business. And, frankly, I think small business needs it more. There are more people employed there, and there are a lot more varied hazards in small business at times.

An obvious, but maybe not so obvious, key difference between farm ag injuries and others is isolation. People who have worked long and hard in farm health and safety and who work for the agricultural health unit, as it then was, in Moree said, "There is nothing that a carpet-laying farmer in the central business district of Sydney deals with that we are not dealing with on farms, or vice versa". The only difference is he is in the central business district and we are out on farms. Farmers say the work environment changes all the time. Well, if you go onto a heavy construction site, it is different by the hour. You are dealing with different environmental conditions, climate and all the rest. But a key difference is isolation, and that has a lot of effect before and after any injury.

My main contribution today is on the manual handling musculoskeletal problems, which across most industries tend to be the highest number and highest cost that we know about. I don't think we know much about the psychological and the hazardous substance related ones. But of those that we know about through Workcover data are manual handling related – they should be called musculoskeletal – are by far the biggest cost and prevalence. I spend a lot of my time working with people.

There has been a huge focus on the Farmsafe movement on the fatalities, because they are easily measurable. They have a lot of shock value. They are very tragic. But I think one of the things we need to do is look a bit further than that. For 10 or 15 years there has been a primary focus on fatalities. And there is a hell of a lot of other stories – and I put in one there in my submission. One of the first cases when I stopped working as a shearer and started working as an occupational therapist, was out to a home where the parents were in their 80s. Their kid had been run over by a tractor when he was three or four, and was head injured, and their major concern was who was going to care for this person because they could not do it any longer. It was just a real lesson for me that even if somebody doesn't die, there are all sorts of impacts. And I will not list them. As far as costs – Workcover never knew about that one as far as a claim, but the cost socially and financially was absolutely enormous. I was there with another clinician and other services and all that trying to deal with it.

I listed there under No. 2 the psychological matters. I think they are huge, particularly with chronically injured rural blokes. I see it all the time, and you wonder whether they contribute to the injury or they are the result of it sometimes. An area I don't know much about, but I think there is a lot of valuable questions to be asked about is the whole area that doesn't show up so much in the data, and that is the diseases and hazardous substances related problems. It is a question I have.

My area of expertise, if you like, or where I tend to focus most is on the musculoskeletal cases. In those industries that have the greatest need, where the greatest number of back injuries and shoulder injuries come from, seems to be the areas that we – when I say ‘we’, I include Worksafe, people practising in injury prevention and all the rest of it – a lot of it is almost in the too-hard basket, whether it be mining or transport or nursing care or sheep shearing, we are really not making progress as far as preventing manual handling injuries. I think some changes are needed across the board, particularly in agriculture.

I will just add a couple of comments under No. 3. Other people would know more about this. I was involved in the primary industry training board in days past. I wonder what the best way to reach people on farms is and how to influence them. I do not think parking them in a classroom and doing classroom sort of learning is the best way. I think farm visits and learning on farms is a lot more effective. We have done quite a bit of that.
If you are going to work in occupational health, I have to, and everybody else I believe, has to get comfortable with industrial relations matters – uncomfortable as they are. One of the things that we have not succeeded in yet in agriculture is having good consultation between the employee and employer organisations at a lower level. I am pretty aware that is still going on right now. Having the benefit of working outside of agriculture – most of my time is not spent in agriculture, about 30 per cent of it is – where I work in manufacturing, meat or mining, with nurses in hospitals, or wherever else – it is just more practised because people are probably a bit more aware of the legislation, and also because they see its effectiveness of actually consulting with employee and employer rather than not involving each other. I am happy to answer questions on that.

No. 4, the thing that comes up again and again, having been involved in Farmsafe Australia, Farmsafe Vic in the past, is I think it is an impediment sometimes that farmers often see themselves as unique. Now, they are – and that is not meant as a criticism – I include myself in that, as seeing the farm workplace as unique. But I think there is a tragedy there in that farming health and safety injury prevention has not used other industry experience to the extent it could have. An oil platform is unique, a hospital ward is unique and all the rest. But there are things that are quite different on a farm. It is the place where people visit, where kids grow up, and I am aware of all that, but there are a lot of things that agricultural health and safety can learn from other industries.

In the area of musculoskeletal injuries, there is something that is not working there across the board. It is the biggest number of injuries usually; it is certainly the biggest cost. The manual handling code of practice put out by Worksafe Vic is a good document, but frankly it is not working. I think the people involved in putting it together would say that we are not making progress.

There are a few problems: one is that while it is important to guard machines and look after hazardous substances properly, they are almost things that you can fix more immediately and, dare I say, if you are going to prevent back injuries, you need to take a 20 to 30-year time span. It is more like trying to get rid of smoking and have an impact on cancer or heart disease, or whatever, rather than a machinery guarding issue. That doesn't fit very well with our cycle of elections – to be upfront about it. It is bit harder. If we are going to have an impact on the huge cost of back injuries in farming – and they are off the map in shearing; they are out on their own, and they are six times the all-industry average – they are just off the map. We are not going to fix it in 12 or 18 months. And we are never going to fix it if we don't start. One of the things that is not working is just teaching people to fill out checklists. I am really happy for people to attack me on that, because I see again and again people doing my job, standing up teaching people to fill out checklists. They run around and fill them out with little understanding of what they are doing. I deliberately, for my sins, work in injury rehab as well, because it is a reality check. You can do all the health and safety fancy paperwork and assessments and all the rest, and the person is going to tell you, "It still bloody hurts. I cannot move." And the doc is going to say, "They are still off work because it didn't work what you put them back to at work." It is a real reality check.

So it makes me again and again and think, "What is aggravating this person? What is stirring them up? What is stressing their body and their mind?" That's the end of the negative stuff, if you like.

I have experience in involving myself for a bit of light relief in being a trainer in country football. It was a fantastic way to spend the winter. It was a revelation to me. It reminded me of how I learnt, regardless of formal training and all the rest. One of the things that taught me most about me and my body – and I am not talking about teaching people not to hurt themselves – was probably as a teenager involved in country football. Those football coaches probably had more impact on me than any Worksafe inspector working through with a checklist is ever going to have. I just realised there was a whole network of people there once you gain your credibility. Having
worked in community development in New Guinea, I am all for getting inside people's organisations and working on their problems with them. I think there are huge opportunities. I was a zealot for getting the Farmsafe alliance going. I think we have to make it grow legs, and to bring in other organisations. If you are from the country, you have to experience it to believe the extent of the football and netball – because they go together – influence across rural Victoria. It is huge. People are involved once or three times a week.

So to somehow integrate health and safety and some of that learning about manual handling and musculoskeletal, there are golden opportunities there to get the message across by getting the Worksafe occ injury prevention message ingrained in those football clubs. I notice, because I see it with my kids, they have Worksafe on their jumper – Worksafe is sponsoring, but I am not quite sure what we are getting for that, apart from the logo. I think there is a golden opportunity there.

The other thing I have been involved in was with the Country Fire Authority doing manual handling musculoskeletal work with them. They are an army. We are talking thousands and thousands of people involved once a week at least for six months of the year. They are learning all about risk management and all sorts of things. They are doing lots of heavy manual handling work. I think there is a wonderful opportunity right where farmers and farm workers are involved to start integrating some of this occupational health and safety manual handling training into a network that already exists and has credibility that Worksafe will probably never have with the farming community.

By the way, I have a lot of respect for Worksafe, but I am being brutally honest about what people's attitudes might be. Again, I haven't had so much to do with the Country Women's Association. I have had more to do with the Women in Agriculture. They have run some things where I have gone along to give talks on manual handling and whatnot. They have been marvellous. They have had a real impact. And that's not politically correct lip service. The fact is these women have had people – myself and other people in this room – onto farms where the two sons have walked off – “Don't want to be around you wankers, we're off to the pub.” But mum has had us there and we have gone around the farmyard and it had an impact because they've had a say.

Very briefly, I hope I have rushed through what I have tried to out. There are words on paper. I am happy to answer any questions. I just tried to summarise on the last page my four key points. I feel like we haven't got a clue about the real extent of the manual handling musculoskeletal related problems. To go and look at Workcover data, which I have done on a formal basis many times, and have dug up information on the extent of injuries – particularly in the sheep shearing industry, which is huge – it is very easy with workers' compensation claims data to miss most of the problem. So be very careful if you have a quick look at it and you don't think there is a problem, because the old adage says, “Garbage in, garbage out.” There are a lot of mistakes made in putting that information in as to what causes the problems. And if you don't look in all the categories, you are going to miss the biggest part of the problem. Less than half of the workplace injuries on farms actually go through that system anyway. I really think we need to have a look at that. If there is something I would appeal for it would be for the two halves of the Victorian Workcover Authority – that is Worksafe and the workers' compensation – I was involved in one recently and one case currently, where there are different pressures coming from each side of the organisation. One being a claims officer acting for and on behalf of the Victorian Workcover Authority signed above that, putting pressure on me and a worker and a doctor to have somebody backdriving a tractor before they could put any pressure on their leg. And the farmer and the claims officer were convinced they could drive that tractor without needing to operate the brakes. And I am damn sure the Worksafe people would have like to have heard about that.

A current one is that I have pressure on me from a claims officer and a doctor and a physiotherapist employed for and on behalf of the Victorian Workcover Authority working inside one of your claims agents pressurising people – not the employer – the employer and me are singing off the one hymn sheet absolutely – to put this person back to work in an environment
where unbeknownst to the claims officers, there is a pin notice there from Worksafe, which can have huge implications. We are talking about a major organisation across Australia that is involved in agriculture that has some serious manual handling problems. This person is onto their second back surgery, not back injury. I guess for me trying to do the best I can to get people back to work it would be nice if the Victorian Workcover Authority two halves could be a little bit more allied. That's it.

The CHAIR – Thank you very much, Michael.

Mr INGRAM – I will start. You covered it to a certain extent. The committee last week heard that many injuries go unreported on farms, particularly if the farmer is not paying Workcover premiums – many minor accidents basically go unreported. In your role, obviously you mentioned there was a large number there that are not on the books. How do we go about getting a real feel about what that level is of injuries that you deal with on a day-to-day basis and other injuries that actually impact on a farmer or their family?

Mr LAWRANCE – Right back at the beginning of Farmsafe – Farmsafe ’88 – at the conference that kicked it off there was quite a bit of information from rural doctors and surgeons, which is where some of that statement is based. To get a more up-to-date accurate picture, I think rural GPs and casualty – some of this is going on, as you know – country doctors, country hospitals are a good source of information. What is useful as well is going and interviewing farmers, farm workers and shearsers – they are a big group of workers; I keep coming back to them. It is absolutely fascinating to sit there and interview people about their history. Initially, they will say, “No, I haven't had an accident. Oh, but I forgot that time when I was in hospital for a week 10 years ago.” It is just astounding here. Once you get people to think through their 20 or 30 years of work history, how much time they've had off work for how many injuries, which probably haven't shown up in anyone's data.

Mr INGRAM – What are the costs or percentage; do you have a rough idea?

Mr LAWRANCE – Honestly I would not hazard a guess. What I would do is say let's have a think through what it cost that family and what it cost the taxpayer for that kid that got run over at three years old and the parents were in their 60s. It probably cost $1,000 a day – not a day – but the day I was there, there were three other people and two other organisations involved. We had to go away and do other work. That was one day out of a long time. That might be at the extreme end, but it is a huge cost.

Mr WALSH – You talked about the best way to reach farmers and farm employers, and you talked about the farm business. Can you expand a bit on that? How you actually do that to achieve an outcome that will reduce injuries and deaths?

Mr LAWRANCE – I do not think there is a one-pronged strategy. I am not saying that I have the magic way of doing it. I think a really useful development on what has been done already is to start getting involved in those organisations that I mentioned – start getting involved in whatever it is at the moment – I don't know, the Department of Natural Resources and Environment, CFA, country football and netball, and I won't reiterate that – but to actually start injecting some of the Worksafe message into those organisations.

Mr WALSH – But in your written document you talk about the ones that come aren’t really the ones you want to get to. How do you actually get to the ones that you want to get to?

Mr LAWRANCE – The point I want to make there is that the classroom learning doesn't seem to be as effective. What does seem to be effective from my experience, I guess, is working with farmers at their farm where we can actually immediately go from the paperwork or the theory of hazard identification, risk assessment and risk control, and then they can walk over and challenge you and say, "What do you do here?" And then having to deal with it in a sort of multidimensional way where you might be dealing with manual handling and hazardous
substances and machinery all together, and actually work out in a real situation what you would do about it. And whether that be with one farmer or 20 farmers, to apply the stuff on farm. I think an hour of that is probably worth a day's training somewhere else.

**Mr WALSH** – How do you identify who you are going to go and see? How do you do that, that they are happy to do it because they don't feel threatened by it? What we have to do is come up with some solutions. We know there is a problem, but it is the solutions we are interested in.

**Mr LAWRANCE** – A gentle solution to get those farmers and farm workers involved who are not now, would be to go to where they are. I have made some suggestions about that. For those that are never going to be involved in any of this, that's a political and an authority decision. Do you wait for the injury to happen or do you go there and do an assessment? I think you can reach most of the people not by asking them to come to health and safety, but maybe to go in where they are in their organisations and networks. I think there comes a time when you actually need to go out on farms and do visits and get people's attention.

**Mr WALSH** – So have you been to any of the farm safety workshops where the organisations run them on farms?

**Mr LAWRANCE** – Similar, yes.

**Mr WALSH** – You don't believe they are hitting the mark or?

**Mr LAWRANCE** – I think the ones run on farms where – and I have been involved in quite a few workshops. I was trained and helped put together the managing farm safety stuff; I haven't been involved directly in them so much, but I think that is evolving and adapting. The ones that I have been involved in we were doing the workshopping and problem solving that I am describing.

**Mr WALSH** – Because all the ones I am aware of actually are on farms. It is usually where you sit down in someone's workshop or wool shed and you go through the theory, and go out to the farm to do the practice. So you have been involved in some of those?

**Mr LAWRANCE** – I have.

**Mr WALSH** – Are they hitting the mark?

**Mr LAWRANCE** – I don't know. I don't want to be critical of what has gone on to now. What my understanding is that we are here to try to figure out how to take it further. I am not saying don't do that. That will probably be effective for a certain group of farmers. I guess the challenge for me is how do we take it further? How do we take it further than we have been for the last 10 years?

**Mr WALSH** – I think that's the challenge for all of us, which is why I was hoping you would be able to articulate maybe how think it should be done.

**Mr LAWRANCE** – I don't want to be critical of that. What I want to do is say I think for a lot of farmers it might be really useful to have more and more one-to-one problem solving or small group problem solving where you are actually working through problems with them on the farm. I accept some of that goes on through the training that has been done, but I think that is an aspect of the training that is being done that is working. I think teaching people to fill out checklists is a pretty dubious exercise – whether it be teaching miners to fill out manual handling things, or farmers. Checklists are a memory-jogger. I think about this a lot, because in health and safety you can be an expert in five minutes based on checklists, or you are going to pretend to be. Check lists are memory-joggers. Unless there is substance there, some memories to jog, they are a waste of time. So any sort of training that just teaches people to go away and tick boxes and
whatnot, I think we have to move on from. We have to actually say, "Okay, here's the machinery we have a guard and we have to get around it to do something else, and we have a manual handling issue here" – to actually come up with the answers on the farm has more impact on people than anything else.

Mr WALSH – So what you are proposing would be very labour-intensive? Given we know there is a cost to industry, where do we apportion the costs of doing that training?

Mr LAWRANCE – The reason I have made some suggestions about these huge networks that exist – whether it be CFA or football – is because if you recognise it is labour-intensive, how do you enlist lots of big organisations? There is a whole network of CFA trainers and community liaison people out there that are out there training every day in the week. So to try to skill them up and support them so that they can inject more health and safety and manual handling stuff into the training they are doing several times a week could be a useful strategy.

Mr WALSH – CFA members in my area are sick of CFA training. I wouldn’t play that up any more, otherwise you may not have any more CFA members.

Mr LAWRANCE – Okay. I don't think the football and netball clubs have been attacked at all yet. I am not saying I have the answers. They are avenues I would follow up.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD – You mentioned in your presentation the role of Worksafe field officers, some good things and some bad things. Do you see a place for them in the future, in your opinion? Can you give me a précis of some of the positive aspects and some of the not-so-positive aspects?

Mr LAWRANCE – Yes, I have said good things and bad things. Some of the bad things might be not about them but rather about people's perceptions of them based on no contact.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD – What do you mean by that?

Mr LAWRANCE – Just that people haven't met them, and they have a perception of what a field officer might be like or what Worksafe is like, and they've never had any contact. So they are probably misconceptions.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD – Like what?

Mr LAWRANCE – That, “If they come onto the farm, they are going to be a problem. They are going to cost me money. They are going to stop me doing things. I'm going to be in trouble.” Whereas even where I have been involved directly with Worksafe officers where we have gone onto a farm and shut things down because the insurer, the local doctor and others all contacted me and others saying, “We have got a problem. We have had the third serious injury from this place that employs eight people.” This is in two years – the third serious injury – and the next will be a fatality; we don't want it. So we went out there, and I suggested to the farmer that they needed to invite the Worksafe field officers in through the front gate because they were coming anyway. They went out there, yes, and they did shut the place down – and there were tears everywhere. But the professionalism of those blokes and the way they worked through that – I mean it was a tragic situation all around – impressed me enormously. I have had a long involvement with a lot of field officers. I am impressed by the way they work.

The machine guarding approach is not working. What I am talking about is the approach to preventing let's say back injuries or shoulder injuries, is that health and safety people often just have the approach of, “Let's prevent the manual handling.” And the human services department, through Norm and the rest, want us to get out there and use our bodies. There is not the time to expand on that. But there is a real problem in that our approach to preventing manual handling injuries is not working. Trying to identify that difference between what is healthy activity and what is unhealthy activity for your body is difficult.
Mr CRUTCHFIELD – So you don’t think the field officers are trained?

Mr LAWRENCE – I do not think they are skilled up enough in that area.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD – Do you see a role for them in the future?

Mr LAWRENCE – Yes, for sure, absolutely, both in doing their policing work and their education work.

Mr MITCHELL – Michael, how do you think the psychological aspect of injuries, particularly back injuries, affects the family and the workplace of the farmer over the short and long period of time?

Mr LAWRENCE – As you can probably imagine, the impact is enormous. Just to give a quick case example – respecting confidentiality – but there is somebody who was a farmer, extremely self-motivated and managing something else at the moment, serious back injury, second operation now. I am watching his decline over the last eight months. Anybody who has been anywhere near back injuries knows the impact. I call them the hidden injured, because they drop out of sight. They are in houses throughout the city and throughout rural Victoria. The impact on the family is enormous. I am not describing it very well, but you can see people facing that in their lives, in their relationships in the family, people just diminish. What was a physical injury becomes far, far more than a physical injury.

When I first got involved in this and we got Worksafe with their minister to present their farm and back injury information, one of the key differences between city and country was the time from injury to rehabilitation – and the day after the injury is regarded as best practice. When you get that started, it was 17 months for farm workers and shearers. If you are involved in rehab like I am, you don’t give up, but you bloody near do once it is past the six or 12-month point. You know damn well you are going to be dealing with psychological problems on top of physical ones. If somebody is being tortured 24 hours a day – and I say this to people, “Look, let’s get suicide out on the table to start with. I don’t want to hear about it after the event.” But this is part of it when I meet people. If somebody is going to torture you physically 24 hours a day, you cannot go to the toilet without it being agony. Your sex life is history. You are worried as hell about finance. You have probably lost your business, but you are hoping you are going to keep your house. If that didn’t have some effect on you, then you were not listening. To be upset or to have some response to that is entirely normal, in my view.

The CHAIR – Michael, you have developed a shearing code of practice?

Mr LAWRENCE – I did, yes.

The CHAIR – You have also done some work with the University Ballarat research team studying ergonomic design in shearing shed design. When you did that, how did you go about it? What were the factors you took into account? How did you approach the task, from the things you have learnt, of deciding what you think did or did not work? Has it been successful? Has it been taken up? If you wrote a research project again, would you do it differently?

Mr LAWRENCE – I would hopefully learn from what I have done in the past. One of the key approaches I have is our Third World development – I mean that in a good way. In community development or development work, the first thing you do is ask the people you are dealing with what their problems are rather than tell them what their problems are. Coming up with the physical answers, if you like, or doing the research is the easy bit. One of the reasons that I think the shearing work that I have been involved with – both through the code of practice stuff and the University of Ballarat stuff – is that we used that approach. We went to the industry, being careful to involve everybody, and said, “You tell us what your problems are. You tell us what you want fixed. You tell us what works and what doesn’t.” That was an exhaustive process, but what it led to was – it sounds jargonistic, but they thought we were working for them. Beyond
that we were working for them so that we were working on what they identified were the
problems so that they were interested in putting the solutions in place. So much so that they were
buggering up the research – excuse me – but I was really happy with it, because they were fixing
things before we got back to mention them. I am talking about farmers changing shearing sheds.

The CHAIR – Has there been a take-up from that? Have you done some evaluation?

Mr LAWRANCE – There is a lot more to do, but that has worked. For example, in New
South Wales Workcover, following on from work we did – and I say “we” very broadly – is that
people who are building 30 or 40 shearing sheds a year now are incorporating those changes
which 10 or 15 years was just a dream.

Mr McQUILTEN – What are the changes in the shearing shed? That was actually my
question. What are the actual answers to the age-old problem of back injury in shearing sheds;
what have you been able to come up with over the past few years?

Mr LAWRANCE – Just a small start, but we are dealing with loads on the back; as you
probably know, they are just hovering around the critical levels, so that even a small change might
take them down, might have a larger impact. We started by saying, “Where is the really heavy
work? What hurts your back most?” There are things I am saying that I feel I should add to, but I
won’t because of time constraints. We know enough today that twisting, bending and loading all
at once is a whole lot worse than doing any one of them at one time. We accept it, but at the
moment you cannot stop the bending. But we asked what else you could do about it. By the way,
every farmer and contractor and shearer particularly knows that some places are a whole lot easier
to work in than others. It is not rocket science. We could have done this in a pub on a Friday
night, but we would not have taken the industry with us, let alone all the different factional players
in it. That was why it was important. The messenger was important, because I often I just put on
a white coat and say what I had been saying all along in a blue singlet. All of a sudden it was not
threatening to the Australian Wool Council, or whatever. We were saying this is actually costing
millions of dollars.

Mr McQUILTEN – But what did you do, Michael?

Mr LAWRANCE – Simple things, like putting the catching pen gate in the right place
so that you are not twisting while you are dragging a sheep. Turn the batons around so that the
sheep were not grabbing the floor when you tried to tip them over when your back was bent. We
experimented – and we have got a lot better with this – with sloping the floor, so that when you
went to tip the sheep – and maybe the best example is that when you are getting rid of a sheep,
international back injury information says that the worst thing biomechanically you can do to your
lumbar disks is “da, da, da.” You would swear they were describing trying to get rid of a sheep
after you have shorn it, where it had its toes dug in, which is exactly what obstructionist chutes
were, which used to be an industrial issue: did you have it there; was it worth it or not? We put
figures to that demonstrate that it is just no longer an argument, and farmers are saying, “Why
didn’t you tell us before? It took me 20 minutes and no cost to fix that problem.” I am talking
about obstruction to the sheep getting out of the shearing shed. It is simple stuff, but took a while
to get there so that it was accepted across the industry as, “Yes, this is where we need to go” so
that when you build a new shearing shed, you design your sheds so there is no problem there.

The CHAIR – Thanks, Michael. We are out of time.

Mr LAWRANCE – Okay.

The CHAIR – Thank you very much.

Witness withdrew