CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into cause of fatality and injury on Victorian farms

Ballarat—27 April 2004

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Witness
Ms D. Long, community health nurse, Hesse Rural Health Service (sworn).
Ms LONG — My name is Dulcie Blanche Long of 400 Colac–Ballarat Road, Cressy. I am representing the Hesse Rural Health Service in my role as a community health nurse.

The CHAIR — Could you please give us your presentation, and we will then have some questions?

Ms LONG — I work out of the Leigh Community Health Service, which is at Rokewood. Farm safety at the Leigh Community Health Centre commenced in 1994 following a successful submission to health and community services for the funding of a pilot program titled Childless Tractors. This program is aimed at injury prevention in the rural sector, targeting primary school-aged children. We know that injury and death is happening on our farms and Childless Tractors responds to this by targeting children in the 9 to 11-year age group — that is, grades 5 and 6 — through the use of media-based peer review to educate in accident awareness and prevention.

The program is an extension of the first aid classes undertaken by the community health nurse in the primary school setting. The nurses are usually known by the children and have a knowledge base of farm and community activity. The goals of the program are to reduce rural-based farm-related injury and identification of preventative risk factors and to increase the awareness of rural children to potential hazards related to farm activities. Our objective is to provide children with a knowledge base to make informed decisions for their own safety by creating a stimulating environment in the classroom, either by the nurses or other presenters, based on their experiences, like farmers who have been injured, and through the use of interactive videos, overhead projections, peer review, classroom discussions and the completion of the workbook — and you all have a copy of that.

The program is now offered and accepted on a second-yearly rotational basis at each of the schools. The program is reliant on the support of the classroom teachers, and the positive feedback from parents continues to encourage these service to promote farm safety in this area.

To further enhance the experience of the children a modified risk assessment farm walk was piloted at the Warrambeen Landcare Education Centre in 1999. To incorporate this into the program, funding options were investigated as the option of busing these students to an appropriate working farm is prohibitive to schools in a remote rural area.

In 2000 we were fortunate to obtain funding from the Victorian WorkCover Authority to make farm risk assessment walks a valued part of the Childless Tractor farm safety program. This funding continued until 2003 when it was no longer available under the WorkSafe guidelines. In 2003 we were able to fund the walks through the VFF Farm Safe Alliance farm safety action group funding. In late 2003 we approached WorkSafe KIDS in Ballarat at the suggestion of WorkSafe Victoria as a funding possibility, and funding from here is not forthcoming at this stage for this component of the program.

The Lismore campus of the Corangamite Health Service and the Timboon Community Health Centre have been provided with ‘Train the Trainer’ sessions in early 1999, and are now presenting ‘Childless Tractor’ programs to an even wider rural area. If we can continue to spread the message to our future farmers, we may provide a safer work environment for the next generation of farmers. The centre has been approached to provide further ‘Childless Tractor’ sessions to more areas outside the Hesse Rural Health Service, and this will be attended as time and finances become available.

Where do we go from here? As a follow-up to discussions with Matt Stevens from WorkSafe KIDS Ballarat, we have discussed options to try to bring together the stakeholders who are providing innovative educational programs that may assist in the reduction of farm injuries or at least continue to raise awareness of the dangers inherent in the rural lifestyle with a view to making a safer environment for all.

This is not about ownership and endless submission writing, it is about an alliance of ideas and innovation. We need to be able to put all this knowledge on the table with the ideal being that we develop a statewide program. To be successful we need to utilise all resources that are available, be it at a local, regional or any other level. While farm safety for children has been a focus of the Hesse Rural Health Service since 1994, programs for the wider community have also been delivered.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Ms Long. We will have a look through the workbook, which is mostly focusing on tractors in particular, but farm machinery in general. One of the more topical issues at the moment is all terrain vehicles (ATVs), and I notice you have a couple of workshops that talk about them. What sort of things do you teach children about ATVs?
Ms LONG — It is a eight–week course, and motor bikes come in in the fifth week. It is about the safe use of 4-wheel and 2-wheel bikes, the protective gear required for the activity, the importance of the bike size relevant to the rider’s size, and safe and legal areas to ride in.

We make them aware of the warning decal on bikes such as ‘Big ATVs’ and that kids under the age of 16 should not be riding them. They all do; we let our own kids do it, but we empower the kids to make the right decision for themselves about their bikes, their gear and their helmets.

The CHAIR — Where do you get that information from? Is it from some of the other riding schools?

Ms LONG — Yes. Stay Upright in Geelong was very good value for us, as was the Honda team and the local motorbike shops in Colac.

Dr NAPTHINE — What schools do you take this program to?

Ms LONG — We go to quite a few schools — Rokewood, Shelford, Teesdale, Cressy, Beeac, Inverleigh, Winchelsea, Mount Moriac, which has unfortunately closed, Moriac, Deans Marsh, Alvie, Lethbridge and Meredith.

Dr NAPTHINE — And what is the reaction from the teachers when you offer this program?

Ms LONG — They ring me now and ask me when I am coming back. We do it on a two-year rotational basis for grades 5 and 6 so they are all covered. For some schools that only have a minimal number of children we do the whole school, but we will go back to them in three years time so the kids are not getting bored with it, but we are still reinforcing the message.

Dr NAPTHINE — How do you fund the production of these sorts of things?

Ms LONG — It comes through the health budget. We have a very innovative CEO who, after the pilot program when we could not get funding, said, ‘It is a program that is needed in this area; we will run with it within the health budget under injury prevention’. And we do get minimal funding from the VFF, Farm Safe Alliance, and it is a matter of going out there and finding sponsors. Massey Ferguson in Colac and John Deere have both been major sponsors, providing a tractor as a prize for the best-completed workbook, and that is always vied for very keenly in the schools.

Dr NAPTHINE — Do you give this to WorkSafe and say, ‘Have a look at this’, to make sure it is consistent with their message? And secondly, do they then give you heaps of money to sponsor it?

Ms LONG — We do not get heaps of money from WorkSafe to sponsor it.

Dr NAPTHINE — What!

Ms LONG — We use one of their facilitators on our farm safety walk, so they are very aware of what is in our program and what we are teaching.

The CHAIR — Have you seen any outcomes that are tangible from your program, especially as far as tractors are concerned?

Ms LONG — With the children?

The CHAIR — Yes, and has there been perhaps a noticeable lack of accidents in the area as far as tractors are concerned?

Ms LONG — I have not looked at the data for accidents in our local area. It is just too big.

Dr NAPTHINE — Do you get a feel from the children that they are taking it in or is it just ho-hum? I can imagine some grade 6 kids saying, ‘I do this all day. What does this lady know?’

Ms LONG — It is a mixed reaction. I tell them I have been on a farm for quite a few years and my grandkids are coming up to their age.
Dr NAPTHINE — But do you get a feeling the kids are taking it in?

Ms LONG — Most kids are, yes, and we get positive feedback from parents saying, ‘Well I can no longer leave the tractor keys in’ because the kids are told that keys should not be left in vehicles and things like that. So slowly the message is filtering through from the kids to the parents and that was our main aim when we started.

Mr STEVENS (from the floor) — I went on a walk with Dulcie. The response from the children was really impressive. The children knew the answers to the questions.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Dulcie, for your evidence today. You will receive a copy of the transcript within a fortnight. Thankyou very much for your time and presentation today.

Witness withdrew.