RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into cause of fatality and injury on Victorian farms

Bendigo – 20 May 2004

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Mrs R. J. B. Lanyon, Victorian winner, Child Safety on Farms Competition 2003 (sworn).
The CHAIR — Under the powers conferred on this committee by the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act this committee is empowered to take all evidence to 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. We are an all-party parliamentary committee, including an Independent, hearing evidence today on the inquiry into the causes of fatality and injury on Victorian farms. Roslyn, can you provide your full name and address and if you are representing an organisation today, your position in and the name of that organisation.

Mrs LANYON — My name is Roslyn Joanne Boys Lanyon. I live at 104 Whittaker Lane, Boort, and I am not representing anybody. It is just me and others in my family.

The CHAIR — If you could provide us with your presentation, and we will have some questions for you afterwards.

Mrs LANYON — I am not very good at talking in front of my peers; I am much better in a room of primary school students, but here goes. As I said, my name is Roslyn Lanyon. I live on a farm near the township of Boort in northern Victoria. Our farm has both dry land and irrigation, and as such we have a rather large channel running through our farm and within sight of the house. We are a cropping and fat lamb enterprise. We also have diversified into an engineering, which is on farm and within sight of the house. We have four children: Brydie, who is nearly 10; Otis is 8; Tilly-Mae, who is 6; and Elias, who is 7 months old and is our new addition. We shifted on the farm when Brydie was 13 months old. My main concern is for child safety on farms, and that is what I will be speaking to today. When I look through the terms of reference, sort of roughly I will speak to those.

I have a very vested interest in farm safety. We won our farm safety award with Farmsafe — we were the Victorian winners — and I will go through that in a bit of detail in a minute, but on looking at the Farmsafe web site there are some interesting statistics which have directly influenced our decision in what we have done, and that was that on average 30 children between the ages of 0 and 14 die on Australian farms each year as a result of injury.

What was very interesting to me was that one-third of these fatalities were visitors to the farm — children who visited farms — and that 575 children were hospitalised each year in Australia as a result of farm-related injuries. The most common causes of hospital admissions were motorcycle accidents, horses and farm vehicles and agricultural machinery associated with things like tractors, which had severe or fatal consequences. In the 0 to 4 area most of the fatalities were drownings in dams or other waterways on the farm. In the next age group the statistics show that motorcycles and horses were the major cause of fatalities. A study done by the Royal Life Saving Society Australia in 2002 showed that whilst drowning rates across Australia were decreasing in swimming pools they were increasing on farm dams and other inland waterways. We can see our rather large channel from our front door, and we have a very deep dam just behind that. We had an incident with our daughter when she was about 18 months old going down to the channel, and that got us into action to do something about it. We put a secure fence house yard around our farm. The play area is about 23 metres by 27 metres — it is a very extensive area — and we have used chicken wire, which comes to nearly 1.2 metres. That is the recommendation so children cannot scale it. So far nobody has scaled our fence; it is a bit uncomfortable for them to put their toes and fingers into chicken wire. That is one thing that we did because Brydie walked down there when we did not have the fence up.

Supervision is another thing that we try to do. We are kind of a bit police-ish. Because we have older children now they have to tell me where they are going and sort of almost report back in almost every half hour or so or at least tell me what area they are going to. We have strict areas that they are not allowed to go to — they are the out-of-bounds areas — and this is especially important when they have visitors or friends over because that is when children begin to push the boundaries and do the unpredictable.

Our gate is not very good at all now, but when we had young children we had a gate that could be physically latched by an adult and very difficult to undo by a child. The area we selected was visually patrolled from the kitchen and the office, which are on the west. It was on the west, so that if I was in the kitchen or in the office, the two main places, I might be supervising within earshot. We have a squeaky gate too, so if they went out the gate you could actually hear them.
In our safely fenced yard we have a rather large lawn area with established and establishing shade trees. We have interesting bush areas. We put our trampoline in a pit so that stops anyone, hopefully, falling off. We have a cubby with a removable ladder, so if little children come on the farm we can take those off to stop falls. We have a shaded sandpit and interesting garden plants. We covered an existing pond with mesh, which was not very deep, but it does not take very much for a drowning to happen. On school holidays we plan special activities and things like that just to keep the garden as an exciting place where children want to be and so that they do not want to go outside the garden.

Like I said before, there are out-of-bounds rules for our children who are not going outside with a supervising adult, and we regularly reinforce these. We like to know where they are at all times, and we ensure that they keep to designated areas at all times. We do not do that just by saying, ‘You are not allowed to’; we give examples why and what can happen in that situation. We put up a sign for our engineering business, and on that sign we put ‘Watch out kids about’ in very big, bold letters down the bottom, so that anybody coming on to the farm will hopefully slow down and be aware that there may be little people either trundling around on foot or on bikes. We have a motorbike, and even though our eight-year-old would dearly like to ride it, he is not allowed to. We do not have a horse and we are not getting a horse — because I would have to look after it! The kids are not allowed to ride on machinery or mobile plant — that includes tractors — and they must also stay away from any vehicles, whether they are being used or not. That is an important rule. They are discouraged from going near, playing on or following farm machinery. So when Isaac is on his tractor or whatever they are not allowed to follow him in any way. They are never allowed to travel in the back of the ute. They really want to, but they are not allowed to. They must wear seatbelts, and we have to keep reinforcing the seatbelt rule of course, because they sometimes forget.

We have firearms, which a lot of farms have, and of course they are kept in a locked gun cupboard and the ammunition is in another locked location. We have chemicals, which are locked in a chemical shed in an out-of-bounds area so they are not allowed to go there. And they also know how to use the telephone and the UHF radio in case of emergency. It does not sound any different to what a normal farm would be, except perhaps we are a little bit too safety conscious at times, especially when kids come on farm. That makes me very nervous, when other children and visitors are there.

When we won our Farmsafe award, I thought, ‘Well, this is a great time for me to explore other different farm safety things that we could do with the children’, but unfortunately there was not a lot we could actually do. There are a few pamphlets and things like that, but unfortunately a really good Farmsafe program that was running before Brydie started school — so that was pre-2000 — is no longer run. That was a great school-based program, and it is not there any more. There was also another program on the Farmsafe web site, but of course it was not going to be run in our area unless there was a lot of interest, and nobody really knows who to contact or whatever.

So even though there are documents and other things you have to know where to look for them and perhaps know how to source those things. You might need Internet access, because you can actually get onto the Farmsafe web site and find a lot of links. You have to have a computer and Internet access and you have to know where to look, because even though I was heavily involved in farm safety for children, it took a little bit of surfing the Internet to find all these things out.

That leads me to any impediments that I found to sustain improvements in farm safety. The area of education and training which I have just mentioned has to be accessible, and it perhaps even needs to have interactive training. If you set up a farm safety day in my community I am not sure whether everybody would trundle along or whether everyone would really find the time to go to child safety day, but if it was something interactive with the children themselves, the kids would end up dragging you along and talking you into going. That is the way I would like to see it going, anyway.

The other impediments might be financial. Our fencing was something we did not even think about, but to fence a house yard, depending on what materials you use, can be quite expensive. A lot of house yards are quite extensive, and I have been working with Farmsafe on a project where they have been looking into different fencing materials, and some of those options at $18 to $45 a metre would put people off fencing their farmyards to make them safe.

Time may be a constraint. There seem to be more important and pressing issues than attitudes towards safety in the use of motorbikes and horses on farms and ideas about the supervision of children and what is expected of children. Our children are children, and they run around and do all those things, but I know some children are actually expected to do farm work from certain ages. I am not saying that is wrong at all, but children’s responsibilities can
change depending on the farm and also on child care. Child care is very hard to get in our area, and we have a two-person farm, and if I have to help Isaac in any other way I have to find someone to look after the little baby and make sure the other three are safe. So they were the impediments, just off the top of my head.

As to recommendations, in my opinion the information, programs and pamphlets need to be made more accessible. They need to be more visual. You need to be able to first of all find out where training and education is, so it needs to be more in people’s faces. That might only be with posters or whatever, but if they do not know about it they will not do it. And I would like to see something done at a school level. I think children are the best educators, and because I am talking about child safety and it is about them they can often come home and say, ‘Hey, dad, I don’t think that augur is very safe’. If it comes from them, it is more of a shaming sort of thing, and maybe parents — and grandparents, because often they are the caregivers as well — might sit up and take note. So education at all levels of education — preschool, primary school and secondary college — is important.

The other area is driver education. Each year our secondary college struggles with the fact that the driver education program may not continue. Because driver education is such an important part of not only farm safety but community safety it is an area that needs to go ahead each year. I do not have any children who are going to drive in the near future, but I know from seeing some of the kids driving around that it must be pretty scary for the parents. Driver education is a terrific program, and it is important for driver safety on the farm and within the general community itself. That is about it. I know that was rambly, but there you go.

Mr McQUILTEN — What was the accident that happened in your area just recently that involved not wearing seatbelts?

Mrs LANYON — That was not supposed to be put on the web site. I am a bit cross that that was put on the web site. There was a family — you would have known about this, Peter — and the father was driving his two children and they had an accident and the children were thrown from the car. He was killed and the children are okay. One little boy is still recovering, but it has taken a long time. We tend to highlight those sorts of things as well if we are reading about them in the paper or whatever just so that the children do not think, ‘Oh yeah, that will never happen to me’, because it does happen to people.

Mr INGRAM — Roslyn, you have taken a number of actions, particularly installing the safe play area, which is more designed to reduce risks rather than remove risks. Would you say that is what you are trying to do — reduce the obvious risks?

Mrs LANYON — Yes. If they have a safe play area that is pretty hard to get out of and if it has interesting things to do inside it, then you are keeping them out of the yard where there are a whole heap of different dangers. There is not only water danger but there are vehicles, machinery and things like that. You cannot just put up a safe fence and say, ‘My kids are fine’ either, because kids are Houdinis, and they can get out of anywhere. So supervision is pretty important in my mind as well.

Mr INGRAM — What you have tried to do there is provide a fairly low-cost fence perimeter. What total cost did that involve?

Mrs LANYON — To fence it? I do not know. I think chicken wire is around about $8 a metre, but of course we installed it ourselves, and that was eight or nine years ago.

Mr INGRAM — There would be no point doing the fencing until you actually had activities for them to do in there?

Mrs LANYON — The more interesting you can make it for them to want to stay in, the better; but if you have a little boy — or a little girl — who wants to go with dad, then I suppose they are going to find a way through any sort of barrier. But making it harder for them to get out is important. It does not need to be an interesting area, and just having that physical barrier might be enough to stop them, especially the ones who do not climb. There are children who do not climb, but there are ones who can scale anything.

Mr INGRAM — This is mainly designed for toddlers, anyway?
Ms LINDELL — Zero to 4. Once they are 4 or 5 they can get out anywhere anyway, and hopefully they are developing a little more sense, and they will know the consequences of their actions once they get out. It sounds awful — it sounds like a prison yard. We are not like that, honestly.

The CHAIR — What things do you think government could do to prevent deaths and injuries on farms, especially for children. What more things can government do? I know you were talking about putting things in people’s face about safety. What other things could be done?

Ms LANYON — The farming community is so varied. There are probably the diehards that will never change, but for people with young children you can take it back to the children themselves, if nothing else. If you cannot get it through to the older members of the families at least you can get it through to the children, so they are probably the first part of our education. There is no use trying to educate the low 4s because they are too young to learn that, but from preschool onwards they can learn and identify risks and areas on their farms. We need to bring back things like the farm safety programs within schools, which need funding of course because the schools are pretty well stressed with all programs that they have. To have a hands-on approach — I am talking primary school here — the program I am thinking of had a model farm, and they sorted through and found all the risks and talked about things and what could happen. That or a program like that would be my major program, or maybe one that involves parents and children and maybe some TV ads or something. They often hit home, something that is fairly visual. I guess, like everybody else, we think it is never going to happen to us, but unfortunately it does and even in our small community there have been some horrible accidents with children on farms.

The CHAIR — Do you have an ATV on your farm, and do you have any rules around that?

Ms LANYON — Yes, we have an ATV. Before I looked into anything to do with farm safety I would not let the children ride the motor bikes. I have seen what my 8-year old does on his bicycle. There is no way he is going to get on a bike with a motor behind it! I am all for banning children from using ATVs. Ours is a fairly old ATV and it is fairly unpredictable. It is tricky for me to ride, let alone anybody else. From my experience children seem to get a false sense of security when they have four wheels underneath them, more so than two wheels, so they might push things to the limit a bit more.

The CHAIR — The saddle, too, probably is not good.

Ms LANYON — Yes, and just the weight of an ATV. If it came down on top of you could be a lot worse off. I have seen my husband come off his two-wheeler badly enough without the four wheels. So that is my stance, but I know people, friends of ours, who let their children ride their ATVs as well as their ride-on mowers and little motor bikes and things like that, without helmets and everything.

Mr WALSH — Have you ever been up to the Ouyen farm safety day that they run up there with the schools?

Ms LANYON — No, but I have heard all about it, yes. I have not been able to actually get up there. That is a terrific initiative. I only heard about that when we accepted our award. We went to the farm safety conference near Ararat and there was a woman presenting on that that day. It was terrific. They had lots of programs and interaction. All the schools and the community were involved, so it was very positive. I do not know how to set up something like that. I guess there are grants and things like that that might be out there but when you ask about these sorts of things it is, ‘Oh, yes, a terrific idea — but!’. Have you been there?

Mr WALSH — I have not but I have heard positive things about it.

Ms LANYON — It is really terrific, yes. Something like that. I know it is a bit hard to say that you would bring something like that to Boort.

Mr WALSH — What they do there is bus the children in from a quite substantial area, so it would not be just from Boort, for argument’s sake, it would the towns within 60 or 70 kilometres.

Ms LANYON — And it is quite expensive, too, isn’t it? That is a terrific way. Perhaps I should get going!

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Roslyn. You will get a copy of the transcript in a couple of weeks time. You can make corrections to any matters or fact or grammar but not to matters of substance.
Witness withdrew.