Kerang – 23 March 2004

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Witness
Ms P. Currie, Regional Coordinator, Loddon Mallee Farm Safety (affirmed).
The CHAIR — Welcome, Tricia. Could you please provide your full name and address, and could you tell us if you are attending in a private capacity or on behalf of an organisation? If you are representing an organisation, what is your position?

Ms CURRIE — Patricia Anne Currie, 21 Lake View Street, Boort.

In what capacity am I attending? I am here as the youth and family team leader with Northern District Community Health Service. You will note that I also have tags as the regional coordinator of Loddon Mallee Farm Safety and for the Victorian Farmsafe Alliance. Basically I am a rural person who has been working in the community health sector for a long time. Consequently I have had many different contacts and roles over many years with the issue of farm safety.

The perspective I would like to bring to your particular inquiry today is that we think about farm injury and accident in a broader context, and that is the one of healthy farms and healthy farming families. That is of prime concern to our organisation.

In this particular area we have family farm-based farming and corporate farming, so the issues start to roll out a little bit differently around how we promote health in terms of injury and farm health. I am happy to determine that there is a difference.

As we know, the farming family is working with the issues around having generally, or most often, its home and workplace together. From looking at the transcripts and the research that you have been doing as a committee I know you have already had lots of pretty interesting things to read and dissertations around people’s views on such things. But constantly we find ourselves in a position where we are not too sure whether we are a farming family member or a farmer in terms of describing ourselves, so thinking in terms of whether I am looking at this as a workplace safety issue or at how our family operates and works means that many discussions have to take place before we even know where to pitch our education or even know where legislation can be of support and assistance. Over many years of my being involved with farm safety issues the tension between legislation and education has constantly arisen. In fact I can well remember standing up at a VFF meeting to talk about farm safety and feeling most uncomfortable. It would have taken a couple of whiskies to get me started, because it is a really confronting issue.

In a general way I will refer to a statement that a fine old character from our district made a few years ago. He is a fellow by the name of Ray Maynard. He once told me he was one of 14, but the foxes got a few. The more I thought about it, the more I thought it was typical of cultural and attitudinal views in terms of rural farms, families and communities. For some reason or other we expected that it was not too unusual to lose not only a few members of our families but also digits and bits and pieces of body parts. We have an expectation that we work and live in ‘dangerous’ — I am putting that in inverted commas — places and that these things happen. That is the big challenge. That 20 per cent of the fatalities that occur on farms are children is totally unacceptable. If that was an industrial figure there is no way we would be sitting here still talking about it many years on. I commend your inquiry and hope it is something that will generate some sustainable changes for us.

There have been references by previous speakers to some of the work that has gone on in this area, and I have been involved in a lot of it, so I am very happy to take your questions on anything that comes to mind. As a health service we are really interested in making sure that mental health issues are considered in terms of farm health and safety. I note that you have had statistics put before you previously that refer to the high levels of self-harm and suicide, and that is part of the spectrum that we are looking at. The incidence of depression and anxiety is quite widespread in our communities, perhaps even more so in terms of our rural communities as they respond to difficult seasonal, economic and social conditions. If you wanted to paint the context of what is happening, it is tough times. Some of this has been measured in the statistics that you are looking at around morbidity and mortality on farms.

The sorts of programs I have been involved with include health assessments where we go out to the saleyards, the CFA rooms, the district halls et cetera, and take with us those health-promoting messages. A children-on-farms program has been referred to previously. I have a very quick comment. Such a program must have adult involvement. Children cannot be solely responsible for their own safety. Farms and farming families need to consider not only their own children but the children who visit farms and look at the issues around supervision and safe places to play.
We have had lots of field days. I think Dr Keogh referred to the Elmore field days. I can tell you there that 11,352 people went through a special exhibition on farm safety. The reason I can tell you that is that a goanna — that is, Giddy Goanna, which was connected to a promotion that we ran at the time — counted the people as they went through. We also ran a couple of specific farm safety programs at Quambatook, where every exhibitor exhibited design solutions in terms of what was around and available. As a little aside, I must tell you that we had to close the second of those as a matter of safety, as the north wind blew and so did the dust, and the marquee started flapping.

We have had a go at a few things. ATVs are a big issue and, together with the local Honda dealer and some of the local schools and farmers, we have developed some activities looking at motorbikes and adolescents. The farm safety action groups, through the Farmsafe Alliance, are also vehicles that enable work to be done with the farmers directly around their own solutions to various things that can happen.

In terms of research, I guess we are very keen to see that research provides the evidence for us to design programs that can be well evaluated and measured in terms of their effectiveness. Some of that research needs to be behind the farm gate. At the moment there is a lot of reliance on the Workcover data and also a lot of the work that goes on with Dr Lesley Day. But there is plenty of room for things that we do not know to be empirically discussed and measured so that we can plan from them.

In terms of corporate farming, it is through many of the occupational health and safety strategies that we can approach corporate farming with everything from being sun smart to protective gear et cetera, but we are working in a very different culture when we start to look at it.

There are lots of issues for us around the training of the rural workforce and the attitudes and culture in which we work. I would like to say that the solutions lie in really well sustained, diverse strategies: health-promoting strategies; strategies that look at the social factors around farming; strategies that involve legislative responses; and strategies that involve design solutions. There is a whole gamut of them that actually need to be put in place at once on a number of different levels actually rolling out, so that you have those national or broader health-promoting things, like the videos, TV programs and radio programs, running at the same time that you are doing things at a local level and running at the same time that you have policy being rolled out though local government or other areas in terms of what can happen. The solutions are there. They will be close to the grassroots in many places, but they do need to be well supported, I guess, by a diverse and ongoing strategic approach.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — My understanding is that you work one day a week as a regional coordinator. Is that right?

Ms CURRIE — The VFF funds one day a week for that position. I personally do not, but that position is funded for one day a week. We cover the north-west of Victoria with that particular position. It is a huge geographical area.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — So is that day enough, or can we go to a.2 or a.5 for that coordinator role? My understanding of the action groups you mentioned is that you have 10 of them. Can you have more, for argument’s sake? Can you develop more in the region, and therefore is this a personnel issue in terms of the coordinator time?

Ms CURRIE — The quick answer is yes, there is a resource issue. As to the second part of your question — whether there could be more — because the action groups are just that, they are based on action; action comes out of preparation, planning and readiness to start with, so when they are actually active will vary according to everything from seasonal conditions to the readiness that perhaps might exist within a district. Sometimes there are very negative motivators, such as fatalities, or whatever, that get people up and ready to go. But at the moment it feels very piecemeal; it feels like you can hopefully catch a bit of an idea that is out there and run with it, but it is difficult to sustain something that is more comprehensive.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — How do the shires link into that program?

Ms CURRIE — I was interested to hear your comments about the municipal health planning. That would be an excellent vehicle for that planning to take place. I would have to say that probably at this point the Victorian Farmsafe Alliance would be a really good forum for local government to be feeding into gathering information around farm safety so they can take it back to their own local areas and determine what they want to do about it. I think it is very early days at this point.
Mr McQUILTEN — What about helmets on ATVs in general, but also on farms — should we make it a legal requirement so that you have to wear a helmet?

Ms CURRIE — It is interesting, particularly if you consider the fact that if you are on public land you are actually required to wear a helmet to be deemed to be safe. I cannot think why going through a gate will change the level of safety around that. Perhaps that needs some of Lesley Day’s research to look at the effectiveness of helmets, but I think it is fairly well proven that they are an excellent preventive intervention. But this is the tension again between legislation and education. I think Dr Keogh referred to something a bit earlier on: we are also working in terms of that cultural view of what it is it to ride free on your ATV on your own property without a helmet. We have some attitudinal issues around that. If we legislate it, how do we follow it up and police it?

Mr McQUILTEN — Insurance would probably cover that, because if they had an accident when they were not wearing a helmet the insurance companies would not be liable.

Ms CURRIE — I guess with the motorbikes one of the main issues that we see — and I am now speaking specifically around adolescents — is that there is an expectation that if you are an adolescent on a farm you will probably hop on a motorbike at some point and do a responsible task on the property. The question comes back to where those young people learn to use the ATV. The first time they hop on it, is it just to experiment and see how well they can work it or are they actually instructed and trained as to how to use it; and if they are, what knowledge is being passed on, and are they actually safe measures? I think one of the important things you need to learn before you hop on any of those is how to stop it before you start it. I guess there is just so much anecdotal evidence out there to say that most kids find out after they have had a tumble off it and gone up a dam bank or something. So, once again, attitudinal issues relating to the safe use of equipment are really important.

Mr WALSH — With all the workshops and field days we have, we get to the people that are interested. How do we get to that group that are most likely the ones that should be there but who do not come, to get them to come along? We can always get the ones that want to engage.

Ms CURRIE — This is where I believe we need this multilayered approach pointing out into all directions; we need to have lots of different strategies running. The radio is a fantastic way to be heard while farmers are undertaking farming activities. They spend many hours in vehicles with the radio on; it just means that that promoting stuff can happen in a radio campaign. We can take the champions and bring them forward into the community and get them known through using the media. I think that would be probably a fairly effective way of starting to pick up on those people who do not turn up at field days or who are not part of a farming group that is doing something that is really proactive but who are still interested because it is about their lives and their families. That is just one thought.

Dr NAPTHINE — What I am hearing is that in your well-sustained and diverse strategies you are fundamentally doing what we are doing but perhaps doing it in a more enhanced way. Is there anything we are not doing that we should be doing? Are there any new approaches?

Ms CURRIE — Good question. I guess new approaches require knowing what it is we are doing it to, and I know there is an evidence basis to that. That sense of what happens behind the farm gate is still based a lot on anecdotal comments as to what happens. I would be interested to see if there are ways we can get a much clearer picture of what is happening. What is new is that we are going through an extraordinary time, particularly in this area, in terms of change in this area — that is, change around the way we farm and the way we manage land and water. There are farm safe issues. We have grown as perhaps dairy farmers, and we find that we are going to need to restructure and use our land in a different way — we might end up growing vegetables; I do not know — so work practices consequently change.

In terms of what is new, there are lots of good heads to look at that, Denis. What is new is that we need to look at ways not to carry old cultures into new situations. I wish I had a few more good ideas. Lots of things we have done are just that, the things we have done, but how we measure and sustain them is the big issue.

Dr NAPTHINE — Do you think farms in this area are safer today than they were 20 years ago?

Ms CURRIE — It is harder to be healthier on a farm today than it may have been 20 years ago. Twenty years ago takes us back to the 1980s? In many ways it is harder to be healthier, and I will add to that the mental issues that are attached to being part of a farm set-up these days.
Mr INGRAM — Are they just work issues and the outside pressures on the viability of farms?

Ms CURRIE — Societal differences do arise. Being a farming family does not mean that you will have different aspirations from any other families in terms of your basic things and the relationships you would like to develop and sustain, except that you should imagine taking your whole family to work with you every day. The differences are internal. There are differences around the relationships that develop, who takes responsibility for things and how you go about planning, such as when you work through and agree to plans you have made and see them through. Those things are responsive to outside pressures. There are other things, such as the influence of global economics in terms of still being a dryland farmer on a small property the to west of here. You can no longer — not that you could for a long time — escape from those broader things in the way that you may have once. I do not think I answered your question, Craig; I think I lost track of it.

Dr NAPTHINE — I suppose I am trying to get a picture. We are doing all these things yet the farms may or may not be safer places. Are we doing the right things, or are there other bigger issues that it would be even worse if we were not doing those things? How do we evaluate them? How do we work out whether where we are going is the right way?

Ms CURRIE — It goes back to what I was saying before. We are doing it, but we are doing it in small little bits — little hot spots here and there. If we were looking at something that was more comprehensive in the way we go about things, then we would have a better chance of measuring that.

Mr INGRAM — You made the comment that the solutions are there, that it is just about implementing them. I go back to Dr Keogh, who made a comment in an article about risk. That has come up as a fairly common trend — that is, that farmers often believe that risk is inevitable and just part of the day-to-day operation of working on a farm. If that is the biggest problem — that is, that farmers believe it is okay to take risks — how do we solve it? How do we get the message through that it is not?

Ms CURRIE — That is a really good question. There are stories of things that happen that make us reflect. We hear of a fatality and, as Geoff said, it hits hard. You think, ‘How did that happen? Why did it happen? They should have known better’. Then we look at it. If we were to look at it from the point of view of it being risky — that is, putting your personal safety at risk because of the task at hand — is that what we are talking about?

Mr INGRAM — I am talking about unacceptable risks.

Ms CURRIE — Some people are risk takers and some are not. When we say farmers we have to start breaking it down. There are some people who will very quickly and readily respond to ways to audit their farm, reduce their risk or self-develop within their situation through health-promoting activities or risk-reduction activities. Other people are risk takers; the same information will be put before them, but they will still take the risk. I am reflecting here on my background, particularly with adolescent health. Looking at kids and ATVs, there are some people who will always be risk takers. We are almost working within a harm-minimisation framework in terms of our approach. The risk will vary according to the individual within the framework that we have put before them.

Mr INGRAM — I am still trying to find the solution. Is it setting up a framework so that farmers can identify the risk? With some of these people it is obvious that they are past the years when they should start recognising that there is a risk and start doing something about it. It appears that farmers continually identify risk. They will say, ‘We had a near miss today’, but not necessarily put an act in place to stop it.

Ms CURRIE — We have some lovely models we look at, such as pre-contemplative and contemplative planning, actually changing your behaviours. It is almost a behavioural-change model that we would be looking at. It is also about intervention in a timely manner. That intervention or that information could come at a time when there has been a near miss, when you are a bit contemplative. You might be thinking, ‘Lucky we got away with that’, even though it is probably more likely to be not really considered got away with because you have done it so many times. But you always get away with it until that one fatal time.

I am suggesting that we need layered strategies that are comprehensive and ongoing — that is, not just doing them once or a few times and thinking you have actually hit the spot. When a farmer takes a risk and gets away with it, there is probably an opportunity at that time for some reflective and contemplative consideration of how he might do it differently, but that will be short lived. He will move on to other tasks and the opportunity will be lost.
If you were in such a situation, maybe when you hopped back in the ute you could hear something on the radio, a little story about what has happened to someone else that might relate closely to what has happened to you. That is an opportunity to start engaging people. I do not know that I can look at it from the point of view of whether there is an industry response in terms of the industry being contemplative and ready to look at it. I think we have still got a little bit more work to do there. That is the cultural stuff I was talking about before — that is, that wholeheartedly there is a sense of our not being able to accept this any more, that the levels of fatalities and injuries are unacceptable and that we are ready to do something.

Mr WALSH — You talked about the radio for the second time. Do you think farmers and country people listen more to the ABC or commercial radio?

Ms CURRIE — That is quite interesting. As a health service we would say that our farmers listen to the ABC and to regional radio. We know that commercial radio gets some pick-up, but basically there are times in the day when farmers listen to the ABC.

Mr WALSH — Country Hour and that sort of thing.

Ms CURRIE — Lunchtime, yes. You may be right.

The CHAIR — Thanks very much, Tricia, for allowing the committee to share your knowledge. You will receive a copy of the transcript. You can correct any obvious errors of fact or grammar, but not matters of substance.

Witness withdrew.