CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into cause of fatality and injury on Victorian farms

Wangaratta – 15 April 2004

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Witness
Ms M. McKenzie, north-eastern farm safety regional coordinator, Yarrawonga (sworn).
The CHAIR — Would you mind for the purpose of the transcript stating your full name, address and, if you are representing an organisation today, naming the organisation and your position within it?

Ms McKENZIE — My name is Margaret McKenzie. I live at 10 Dunlop Street, Yarrawonga, 3730. I have a position as a regional farm safety officer which is funded by Farmsafe Victoria for the Hume region.

The CHAIR — Please give us your brief comments and then we will have some questions for you.

Ms McKENZIE — As I said, I have a position for one day a week that is funded by Farmsafe Victoria. I started in that position in July 2003. In that role it was intended and the job description states that I am a liaison person between the farm safety action groups of the region and Farmsafe Victoria in Melbourne to help support the farm safety activities that are initiated by these groups.

I am going to focus on terms of reference nos 3 and 4 for the purpose of my submission. You have heard from David Williams from Farmsafe already a few weeks ago and he gave you details of the farm safety action groups in the state. They conducted a review in 2003 and showed there were eight groups in the Hume region. This region stretches from Shepparton to Corryong. When I started in the position I contacted most of these groups and they express a willingness to be involved in further farm safety activities, but also stated that they had needed more direction and support. As David mentioned in his report, and as Cathy has already touched on, all these groups run on volunteers, so there is a high level of volunteer burnout within these groups. When I initially contacted them they were enthusiastic, but were really in need of a lot more assistance than one day a week position funding can provide.

When I spoke to a lot of these groups looking at what their activities had been over the past years, a lot of it was focused on awareness, particularly in the area of educating children, but it seems that it has been a very ad hoc approach. One group will run a farm safety day one year, then a couple of years later they might say, ‘We should run another farm safety day’. This is for kids from schools. While I think these things are all very good, it seems to me that a more effective way on a regular basis would be to try and get it included in the curriculum for schools in regional areas. For example, the curriculum standard framework for schools includes key learning areas of health and education and studies of society and environment in rural and regional schools. Maybe these topics could include a farm safety unit that was fitted into a two-year curriculum, so that rather than it being reliant on the farm safety action group or the local community health nurse who might have an interest in that field, it is something that is actually in a curriculum and continues every two years, and then it could be supported by Farmsafe with new documents or books like the RIPPER program or things like that. I think that early education is really important with assisting families on farms to strengthen the messages about safe behaviour, but I think it is a really small part of the picture because children are not really the ones in a position of power on farms to change things to make them safer for them or their families.

Since being in this position, I have been involved in the promotion of Farmsafe Australia’s campaign for safe play areas on farms. I contacted groups I believed would be relevant to this type of activity, such as maternal and child health nurses in the region and community health nurses and the local VFF groups. The problem with this particular activity was there was really no way for me to find out how effective I have been with the dissemination of that information. The DHS in Victoria, I am sure you are aware, has just funded a project on the toddler-drowning project that we are going to start working on over the next six months. Hopefully this will have measurable outcomes and they will be a bit more worth while if we can tell how many have used the information they got from Farmsafe Australia and put in safe play areas, rather than just putting information out there and not really ever knowing what the result of it was.

Moving on to no. 4, the impediments — and this is coming from what I have seen in eight months in this job — one would have to be the lack of adequate resources for getting information about farm safety initiatives out to farmers and farming families. When I speak to people through the course of this job who are on farms, the majority of people have never even heard of farm safety action groups, so to me that was a huge gap. A lot of them are just groups in this region — maybe one person who happens to have got that job with another role that has come along. In some instances that is community health nurses. In one instance it is the secretary of the local VFF branch, but again all of these people have lots of other roles, and farm safety seems to be one thing that gets pushed to the background.
The next thing that has been evident to me is the lack of evidence as to what works in sustaining improvement to reduce the number of injuries on farms. I am a community health nurse and I have also had 10 years experience as an oncology nurse. In both of those roles, everything that we do has to be based on evidence of best practice. I have not really been able to find much evidence of best practice on farms with the exception of tractor rollover bars and obvious things like that, but when it comes to improving safety for children on farms, for example, we know from metropolitan areas that putting in fences around swimming pools has dramatically reduced the number of drownings. I guess it stands to reason that putting a fence between farm waterways and kids is going to have the same effect, but hopefully that is what we will find out when we do this toddler-drowning program. I think certainly since I have been in this position, the economic priority is just survival, and hopefully we will be having someone talk about that in a bit more depth later on, because with the drought, farm safety things are just really on the backburner economically.

I also think that farmers as a group — and this is not really negative, maybe it is a statement about men as well — do not see their health in terms of an asset to them until something goes wrong with it. Even, for example, things as obvious as the Sun Smart program, which is a very well documented program throughout Australia and everyone knows that if you wear your sunscreen and you wear your hat, you are going to get less skin cancers, and if you look around our area in particular there are so many men over the age of 50 who have bits of their ears missing and bits of their face and hands. I did a quick non-evidence based study, but a ring around.

Out of 20 young farmers in the Yarrawonga area, not one of them wears sunscreen as a routine at all, and they are out in the sun all day. I think last year WorkSafe put out a video on farm safety — how one Victorian farmer made it happen. The guy on that video was walking around and he had no hat on. I think there is a bit of a gap between safety and general health, and I think maybe we need to be looking at farm safety in the broader context of health for men on farms and for families on farms. Last year I attended the Farmsafe conference in Warrenmang. The Department of Human Services presented a workshop there looking at incorporating health promotion about farm safety into health promotion plans at community health centres. To me that seems like a good idea in that it will use a network that is already there, but I think again it would need to be adequately resourced because most community health nurses and community health centres are already stretched to the limit in rural areas with the resources that they currently have. That is my spiel.

The CHAIR — Penny, would you mind telling us briefly about how the toddler-drowning project is going to work?

Ms McKENZIE — Okay. I learnt about it last week, so it is in the planning stage. They are going to have 10 focus groups across the state, and they are keen to focus on this area up in the north-east so they want 5 focus groups initially with between 8 and 15 people attending each of those focus groups. They want to hold those groups on the property of one of the people. They have written out a survey and have looked at some of the information that has come out of the Farmsafe Australia project. Have you seen the booklet with all the recommendations they have for a safe play area?

The CHAIR — I think I have seen the booklet here.

Ms McKENZIE — They are using some of that information. They have put that into a survey to ask people whether they think that the recommendations of that are something they would do and if they are not, why — whether it is finance or whether they think it is impractical or whatever. Their idea is to get these surveys looked at by an independent body. When they run the focus groups they will include hobby farms, so any property of 10 acres with a dam could be included. They want to look at a particular property and have people come up with suggestions as to what they think would be practical, affordable solutions on that particular property. I understand that Farmsafe will fund some of the improvements to that particular property and then have the group come back and comment on whether they think that has been a worthwhile exercise. They will run those focus groups, and at the end of that they intend to run a pilot program in one area and have a real push. I am not sure that this is set in stone yet, because I think they need to find out if they will get further funding. They are thinking along the lines of having some kind of program whereby they could subsidise things that are practical. For example, if it is was part of the project, people could get swimming pool gates to put in a fence to make the area on their farm safer for their children. It is targeted for under-5s.

The CHAIR — Will the focus group help people with young children?

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The CHAIR — Will the focus group help people with young children?
Ms McKENZIE — Hopefully, that is what I will start doing now, running five times 15 people through these groups. That will take more time than one day a week, so we hope there will be extra some funding for that.

Mr WALSH — One day a week would be very challenging!

Ms McKENZIE — It is very challenging.

Mr WALSH — So if, for argument’s sake, it became a full-time position, what do you think you would be able to achieve and how would you measure that you had achieved an outcome apart from say, participation?

Ms McKENZIE — I think we need to look at specific projects. For example, reducing the toddler drownings, which have presented heavily in that area, is a specific goal. If subsidised gates are available information could be sent back to the department to show how many people took up the suggestions to use them and therefore the department could gauge how many people took this up and therefore how many people got a safe play area on their farm as a result of this particular endeavour. Does that answer your question? That covers one area.

Mr WALSH — Children at risk is one of the key areas. One other key area is older men in general. How can we have an impact on older men?

Ms McKENZIE — By encouraging younger men to stay on farms by maybe giving a boost to the community so people tend to see farming as a viable source of living — by making farming communities more attractive, I guess, to young people to stay rather than to leave. Then the older farmers can retire and they will not be put so much at risk.

Mr WALSH — Dare I ask how we do that?

Ms McKENZIE — I do not have a solution, I am sorry.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Margaret, for your submission. You will get a copy of the transcript and will be able to correct any matters of fact or grammar. Thank you.

Witness withdrew.