RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into cause of fatality and injury on Victorian farms

Robinvale – 23 March 2004

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Mr B. Denner, Founder, Centre for the Advancement of Men’s Health, Mildura (sworn).
The CHAIR — Under the powers conferred 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 that all evidence taken by this committee, including submissions, is granted immunity from judicial review under the provisions of the Constitution Act. I also wish to advise witnesses that any comments made by witnesses outside the committee hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege. This is an all-party parliamentary committee and includes one Independent.

We will start with the inquiry into the cause of fatalities and injuries on Victorian farms. Welcome, Bernard. Could you give us your full name and address? Also, are you attending in a private capacity or representing an organisation? If you are representing an organisation, could you please give your position in that organisation?

Mr DENNER — I am Bernard Denner. This evening I am presenting in my capacity as the founder of the Centre for the Advancement of Men’s Health. I also represent the Mallee Track Health and Community Service at Ouyen, which is where I am working at the moment and where we have developed further some farm safety resources. That address is in Britt Street, Ouyen, 3490 — in remote Victoria!

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. Could you make some brief comments, and then we will ask you some questions.

Mr DENNER — As I said, I represent the Mallee Track. In regards to farm safety, as I have said in my submission, I have been involved in farm safety for a long time. I have conducted my working men’s health nights and men’s health nights around Victoria, Australia and overseas. We have had hundreds of men turn up to a men’s health night to learn about their health, but when we put on a farm safety evening very little interest has been shown and very few men have turned up. This was quite disheartening to us because there are significant numbers of deaths and injuries on farms. What was of significance to us was the number of young people and children dying and being injured.

I was at Daylesford at the time, and together with Dr Greg Stewart developed the Kidsafe on the Farm program, which I have supplied to the department. This was all about the fact that we need children to have a little bit of power in looking after themselves in the farming environment, so the program was introduced. A few programs had been produced for schools, including the Rural Injury Prevention Primary Education Resource (RIPPER) program, but they were teacher-focused; the resource was given to teachers. As we all know, in most rural schools, as well as outer urban schools, over 50 per cent of teachers are from urban areas and have no knowledge of farm safety whatsoever, and 90 per cent of them do not live on farms. Dr Greg Stewart’s father-in-law had a farm, so we decided to develop the Kidsafe on the Farm project straight onto that farm so that students could view farm safety on a working farm and learn more about it. The program has had a lot of interest and has gone national.

It is very disappointing that the Victorian government, I suppose because of Farmsafe and the VFF, did not show a lot of interest; however, the program is still going and we are now in 2004. The Kidsafe on the Farm program was launched by the South Australian government as a new resource in South Australia and it was branded for and has been used in South Australia. We also introduced a secondary school component. So that is what it is all about, and the reason for doing it.

Chair, do you want me to go over the recommendations?

The CHAIR — Yes, please.

Mr DENNER — I suppose our biggest concern is education. I am going to talk about farm safety and early intervention education, such as awareness programs that target primary and secondary school students for all the reasons that I have stated. Funding is exceptionally important. There is no protocol or policy in the Victorian Department of Human Services to provide streams of funding for farm safety other than through WorkCover and other organisations. There is no cooperation between the Department of Human Services and the education department to develop such protocols that would provide funding.

It also has been very hard. I could have a men’s health night — I have just come back from Wimmera Mallee Water, where 60 people turned up. It is very hard for me to get funding to include farm safety in my men’s health nights. We have had between 20 000 and 25 000 men through in the last 10 years. The only example at the moment where this work continues to be very good is at the Ouyen Farm Safety Expo, which you will hear about tomorrow at Sealake. This particular program is fantastic; it has won many awards. But we need a program that will
demonstrate that there has been behavioural change, so that we can see that education of young and secondary school-age children is working. We need to see that those children have turned the tide at home, that dad is not making them walk up the silo any more, that he is not putting them on the back of the tractor and that they are wearing helmets and so forth.

Additional funding is needed for this program so that it can be done on farms. The farm they are using is absolutely fantastic. It is run on the farm one year and then moves into the classroom the next year. The program evaluates and tracks behavioural change not only by seeing the kids but also by seeing the parents and getting feedback in that environment on how the program is working. Without funding none of that can happen. That tracking and evaluation should be done by a university. When we started this program we used La Trobe University’s Bendigo campus. We require supportive evidence based on evaluation and research of a model program, and this program is a particular model program. We need to move down the track and say, ‘This is what we need to do’. I bring to your attention the fact that education has worked everywhere else, most lately with breast cancer awareness education. Certainly Victoria now has the lowest mortality rate of heart disease for men in the country, whereas 10 years ago it had the highest. We are the only state that has ongoing and very productive men’s health educational sessions. There have been education programs for seatbelt use, anti-smoking, safe sex, chemical use, stopping litter being thrown from cars and recycling. They are all examples of good education that has taken place through schools.

Our second recommendation concerns policy. You cannot get funding from anywhere in the government unless there is policy, clear government guidelines and departments having the responsibility for funding opportunities instead of making one-off grants for which people have to apply every year to try and get some money. One of my recommendations is that I hope this committee can encourage the department to develop a policy that impacts on farm safety for young people.

My third recommendation is tax concessions to support farm safety. It is very simple: if you are a company and you have a willingness to support a structured farm safety program — not one that you just had in your area and said, ‘I am going to do farm safety this week’, but a structured farm safety program that has an evaluation and research process — you will have a taxation incentive to do that. Also if you are a company and supplying farm safety equipment, you will supply with that farm safety equipment user family-friendly resources for the whole family to use — not just how to use the equipment, but how to safely use the equipment — and at the same time provide information for the family.

My fourth and last recommendation is to have legal consequences for responsibility for a farm death or injury as exists for workplace incidents, such as fines and jail terms, sending a message to the farm sector. It must be considered that a farmer having a tractor accident outside the farm gate will result in a charge. Inside the farm gate it is seen as a terrible tragedy. If you have a motor vehicle accident you will be dealt with with the weight of the law if you have contributed to the death of one of your passengers. For example, infant deaths in cars 10 years ago were seen as a tragedy; no charges were laid. But now, if you place a child in the back of your car and leave it outside a shopping centre while you race in to get some groceries and that child dies, you will be charged.

I live in Mildura. My daughter asked me the other day, ‘Dad, are you going to say something to your bloke down the road where I am grape picking?’ I asked, ‘What do you want me to say?’ She told me he had a fully laden tractor, with grapes behind, going through his paddock and coming onto the main road with two of his grandchildren sitting on the tractor. If we do not institute legislation that treats farm deaths in the same way as infant deaths and other accidents and apply the full weight of the law, we are not serious about farm safety.

It will be a very, very hard way to go, but at this point in time the committee must consider impacting on the behavioural change to reduce death and accidents on farm. Certainly with legislation of this ilk, to make people more responsible and accountable, especially if they are in charge of another adult or a child, then I think we might get somewhere.

Mr INGRAM — I take up first of all the education aspect. Although I recognise your comments on tracking to make sure that we can prove it is working and to get the most out of it, we have a number of people who have given evidence to the committee that there has been a limited take-up rate. They say that while we are educating people at schools, field days and stuff like that, there has to be a generational change, and it will take a fair while for that message to get through. The committee has heard evidence that suggests that, if we can get farmers to bring their children to a field day-type of environment that has a particular youth safety element, then we
can actually preach to both the parents and the children at the same time. Have you tried anything like that up here, and do you believe that is one method of getting the message across?

Mr DENNER — In Daylesford we brought the parents into the classroom when we had the year in the classroom. We were very fortunate to be filmed by the *Totally Wild* television program. We showed them the film and took them out to the farm. This year we have taken the parents out to the farm at Ouyen. But what was very disappointing again was that the kids turned up and hardly any parents were there. I do agree with taking your kids to the farm expo, but you have to take into account that they are taking them out of school, and mums would not be that keen on that. Also, we really cannot track them there. If we keep them in the school environment and have farmers and fathers and mothers come into the school environment, we can really track them. The questionnaires are incredible. Universities do this very well. We need to know that it is having some impact. We know from doing that that we automatically had impact, because we gave the kids power. They could say, ‘No, I should not be doing this. No, I do not want to get on. Grandad, no, I will meet you down there’. We need to get that feedback. But they have to be reassured all the time; it does not happen in one year, it is an ongoing thing. It has worked.

Mr WALSH — When you talk about sending a message to the farming sector, are you saying that if a farmer gets killed in a farm accident you would actually fine his widow?

Mr DENNER — No. I said ‘if he was in charge of somebody’. It is a tragic incident if a farmer rolls his tractor and dies. It is no-one’s fault; it is his fault. If you are in a single-car accident and you kill yourself, unless they can find someone to say — like in the case of Princess Di — that someone cut you off, you die and it is your fault and no-one else’s, unless it there is something wrong with the car and someone has tampered with your brakes. But in a farm accident where another person is involved and it is a child and they are sitting on the back of the tractor, on top of the tractor, and they get killed, that adult in charge of the tractor should be charged. It is tragic.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Or, in fact, it can be anyone, whether it is a kid or not.

Mr DENNER — Yes. And I said that too: anyone who is in charge of somebody else. It can be an apprentice. Such an incident has happened in Queensland, where large stations are now accountable for their staff who have accidents. We had that recent case where the boy fell off the horse and did not have a helmet on. Now they are hoping to invent Akubra helmets.

Mr WALSH — So where does the issue of personal responsibility come into it? If the person riding the horse had had the correct instruction and had been given the correct equipment, like an Akubra helmet if and when it is designed, and then chose not to wear it unbeknownst to the supervisor, where does the issue of personal responsibility come in, versus the responsibility of the employer?

Mr DENNER — Workplace health and safety does not work like that. If you work for a council and you do not wear your hat and you take it off and you get cancer, the council still has a problem. It is the council’s duty to ensure its staff wear sufficient covering when they are out. That is just workplace health and safety. The industry is responsible. I hear what you are saying: who is responsible if he get out to the back of the paddock and takes his helmet off? That would then be for the court of law to decide, not us. Obviously in the recent case the parents fought hard, and they won the case. But, if you like, I am horrified that a man can drive down a main street in Mildura between his grapevines with two kids on his tractor, a fully laden one, He only has to hit a bump to have an accident.

Mr WALSH — With respect, that is a separate issue. But if an employee has had the appropriate training and has been given the appropriate equipment and then out — —

Mr DENNER — And refuses?

Mr WALSH — No, not necessarily refuses, but out of the line of sight of the supervisor, which a lot of employees are, chooses not to use it, I have trouble with the employer then being responsible. If that is the case you will get to the situation where no-one will employ anyone.

Mr DENNER — Yes, but that is a point of law. I would find it quite difficult to say, ‘Do not have this legislation because someone might be taken in this way’. That is for the court of law to decide; that is what workplace health and safety is about. But somewhere along the line everything we have done so far and the money
that has been put into farm safety has not reduced child accidents on the farm. Certainly, roll cages have reduced —

Mr WALSH — The people I am talking about are not children, but employees.

Mr DENNER — Yes, but you are using that as an excuse.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Chair, with the greatest respect, if we need to change the law regarding the liability of employers, which is what I think Mr Walsh is talking about, it is a bit hard to ask the witness to answer that. There are laws governing the liability of employers and there are legal issues. I am not arguing either way, but it is a bit hard for the witness to comment on that.

Mr WALSH — With regard to children, I agree with Mr Denner, but with regard to employees, we are talking about adults.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — The current laws apply to that. There are liabilities, and they are mitigated according to the responsibility that is given to the employee.

Mr DENNER — I agree with you, Mr Crutchfield. It is the same as falling off a building. The workplace will make a decision on that, and it is their judgment; it is part of the law.

Dr NAPTHINE — Could you to explain your proposed tax concessions for farm safety?

Mr DENNER — Just off the cuff, I believe there should be incentives, just as there are a lot of other incentives for industry to do things. If you wish to be a supporter there are some tax breaks at the moment, but we should publicise them a bit more and encourage more companies involved in the agricultural industry to support communities and sustainable community developments. Farm safety is just one area. We have seen some classic examples. Farmsafe and the VFF are very supportive, but they cannot be the only ones.

Dr NAPTHINE — So you are talking about an industry donating to a farm safety program?

Mr DENNER — Correct, and having some sort of financial advantage for supporting that, then the communities are responsible for supporting that community from the point of view of giving credit where credit is due. But when you get down to the bottom line, taxation works very well. At the same time there could be some advantages for them in producing appropriate literature that goes with the sale of farm machinery as well as family-friendly stuff. Heaps of stuff is being produced, but it is not targeting farm safety per se.

Mr McQUILTEN — You have talked about farmers not turning up when you hold farm safety meetings.

Mr DENNER — In my experience.

Mr McQUILTEN — But you also state in your submission that when men’s health information sessions are held thousands turn up.

Mr DENNER — Correct.

Mr McQUILTEN — Can you please prove that?

Mr DENNER — You only have to get onto my web site. It has 80 000 hits a month. I work all around Australia. I have anything from 100 to 400 men. To give you a couple of examples, at Bendigo a couple of years ago I had 330; at Castlemaine 270; at Warracknabeal 300; Ouyen 300. I could go on. I have just come back from Kalgoorlie —

Mr McQUILTEN — Clearly I have never been to one, but just keep —

Mr DENNER — That is not very good! You obviously need to go to one. What area are you in? I can organise one for you. You would make a good guest speaker.

People turn up in droves. They are mostly farmers, but it is because they know there are issues with men’s health. We put posters up everywhere so you can look at the mortality rate of men from cancer, heart disease — the whole
lot. Farmers do not want to die early, so they turn up; it does not matter where they are. But with farm safety they say, ‘We do not have an issue with farm safety. Farm safety is not my problem. I have never had an accident. We are never going to have one, so why do I need to bloody turn up to that?’ That is the attitude I do not like.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Thank you for telling us. You are the first that I am aware of. There is some potential for those linkages if we could tap into them. Many presenters have talked about the dearth of farmers, and that farmers — males in particular — do not come. With the rest of the programs, whatever they may be, there is an opportunity to tap into your program in some way without — —

I do not know how you disguise it so that they turn up and you can throw farm safety in. As an aside, you may have some ideas how to do that.

My second point is about other partnerships. Government is an obvious one, in whatever form — federal or state. What role should shires and municipalities take and, as importantly, the VFF? There are differing views about how involved they have been in the past and how involved they should be. Do you have any comments in respect of that?

Mr DENNER — From a community perspective I do not think that in this area we have problems with the Mildura Rural City Council getting behind anything that is very good. It is certainly behind the farm safety program in Ouyen.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Is it a municipal health plan?

Mr DENNER — No, I do not think it is in anyone’s plan. It is certainly not in the government’s plan for farm safety.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — There are some shires that incorporate farm safety in their municipal health plans.

Mr DENNER — What aspect of it?

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — That is up to the municipality.

Mr DENNER — That is where my concern would be. The VFF is very supportive, but how far do you go? I say again that if you are an industry and you are supporting something, what you are supporting had better be good, sustainable and have outcomes. The only way that can happen is with supportive funding that provides research and accountability and behavioural changes. That is what industry is looking for. Industry wants things that are working, and it also wants want partnerships with government. Certainly we should look at those partnerships, and in any community. If you take the Ouyen community and its farm safety, project the whole community contributes. As a hospital we provide the use of a lot of equipment, which comes to many thousands of dollars, but it is not cash. It supplies some infrastructure for them. When you have a good program where industry and other bodies can see that it is actually getting a result, they will be more supportive. That is what government is all about — that is, funding model programs initially, and supporting them to have good outcomes so they can be sustainable in the future.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — I have a supplementary question. I was trying to draw out of you the linkage between a lack of participation in farm safety but the clear participation at men’s health sessions. Do you see other organisations, such as the VFF, that may have some linkages and/or close contacts with farm communities and/or shires encouraging people — —

The end result is that you would like to see as many people at a farm safety session as at a men’s health session.

Mr DENNER — No, I have not — —

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Can you see the VFF or the shire doing it? How do we get people — —

Mr DENNER — If I have a men’s health night, I include farm safety.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Do they know that?
Mr DENNER — No, they do not; not at all. They absolutely do not. That is disappointing, but they cannot go anywhere, and they are not about to go anywhere, so they have to listen to the message anyway.

I have some concerns with your angle of, ‘This should be for men’. The VFF does a very good job with men.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — I am not saying it should be just for men.

Mr DENNER — Targeting men at field days and so forth is already done well. The Victorian Farmers Federation and field days are absolutely fantastic, but people do not go home with a take-home message for their children. I know this is working from the bottom up, but we have not seen any improvement. Fantastic field days have happened for the last 10 to 15 years. They have taken over the Royal Melbourne Show! Basically I am saying that because of my expertise in men’s health — —

Look at men’s health all around the world. Hundreds turn up in Canada. There were 750 in three little towns. We know how to do men’s health. They turn up, but it frustrates me that men do not turn up to farm safety sessions. The young men do not turn up to men’s health nights, so now we have them in a workplace so we get them all. They are conned as well! But with farm safety we have never been able to get men in the numbers we require to take it seriously, so we went to the schools. In all my experience, if you turned up at Ouyen for the farm safety expo we are talking about 1000 kids going through. That is a lot of messages. It is a hands-on message that goes to the farm with the VFF and everyone supporting it. There are resources going home. Kids are banging dad over the head with a paper bag and saying, ‘This is what I learnt today! It is part of the school system. You have to listen! I went to school today, went to farm safety and learnt something. I am not climbing up the silo. I need to look at the motorbike. Blah, blah, blah!’.

Instead of hearsay and conversations, we need to supply a model program like this one and do so with some funds to do proper research and evaluation of the parents and what is actually happening at home so that it is a fact.

The CHAIR — Thanks very much, Bernard, and thank you for spending some time with your recommendations for us as well. It is really important. You will receive a transcript in a couple of weeks. You will be able to correct any matters of fact and grammar, but not matters of substance. Thank you very much.

Witness withdrew.