CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into cause of fatality and injury on Victorian farms

Seymour – 14 April 2004

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Witnesses

Ms L. Linton, health promotions officer (sworn);
Ms M. Joiner (sworn); and
Ms V. Salter (affirmed), Mitchell Community Health Services.
The CHAIR — Welcome, everybody. Thank you very much for your attendance today. Under the powers conferred on this committee 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 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 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 cause of fatality and injury on Victorian farms.

I welcome Lisa Linton, Marg Joiner and Veronica Salter from Mitchell Community Health Services. For the purposes of the transcript, would you mind giving us your full names and addresses, and, if you are representing an organisation today, the name of that organisation and your position within the organisation.

Ms LINTON — My name is Lisa Linton, and I represent Mitchell Community Health Services. The address is 72 Ferguson Street in Broadford, and I am the health promotions officer. I will introduce my farm safety team from the Mitchell Community Health Services: Marg Joiner and Veronica Salter.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. Your evidence will be taken down and will become public evidence in due course. If you would like to make some brief statements, we will then have some questions following that.

Ms LINTON — Just to give a bit of an outline, Mitchell Community Health Services is situated in Broadford, and we provide direct care in community services, plus we conduct health promotion projects related to priority areas for the Mitchell shire. We cover areas from Seymour to Beveridge in the south and Tooborac in the east.

For a number of years farm injury has been a high priority on our health promotion plan. The 1999 report of the Central Highlands Division of General Practice has stated there are unusually high rates of injury within the Mitchell shire, and that evidence, coupled with anecdotal evidence from a number of different sources within the shire — from newspaper reports and also from mingling and interacting with the farmers we have contact with — indicates that it is quite a significant issue.

There is a high degree of farming with animals in this area, so we have assumed that is one of the areas of risk. Beyond that we had no data or information because, as you may be aware, there is no specific data collection within the shire. The hospitals do not collect that sort of data, so we had to virtually start from the beginning and find more information about what kinds of issues surround farm injuries within Mitchell. We developed a farm safety survey and sent out over 300 questionnaires. We received only 77 back; that in itself shows we had some problems in terms of reaching out to our target group. We used the conclusions we drew out of the survey as a bit of a springboard for working further with the farming community, bearing in mind we had only 77 responses, which were obviously not truly representative of the whole community but which gave us some indication of the kinds of trends in this area. Most of the farmers who participated in the survey were livestock farmers; most were over 50 years of age; and some of the main causes of injury that came out more strongly than others related to animal handling, operating agbikes and machinery, falling, and operating chainsaws.

The types of injuries were rated moderately severe to severe, and if you work with farmers you know that if they record injuries as moderately severe then in effect they are very serious injuries, because they are very reluctant to report injuries that are minor. Those injuries included cuts and bruises, back injuries and hearing loss, in that order. Another issue that was raised by that report is that 28 per cent of the farmers who responded required medical attention for their injuries, which shows they were quite severe injuries.

Some of the significant barriers that were reported by the farmers involved in the survey were that they were very reluctant to have interference by bureaucracy. That was seen as one of the main barriers to their implementing farm safety strategies on their farms. There is a very high acceptance level of risk and the inevitability of injury, which is of concern. There was also a very strong directive by those farmers that there was an important need for us, as people involved in helping them, to have a local understanding of farm safety — that is, not to apply Victorian statistics to our local situation but to have more of an understanding of what is happening in our area.
There were certainly some tensions between the different farming sectors — the blockies, who are hobby farmers, and the broadacre farmers. There are some tensions between the two groups as to where the injuries are coming from, and we certainly need to look at some more research in that area to identify where the injuries are occurring. Is it in fact a fallacy that hobby farmers have more injuries, or is it that broadacre farmers, through complacency or experience, are not taking notice of our farm safety messages? We certainly need to do some more research around that issue.

The strategies we developed are based on the principles that they need to be community driven, community referenced and very much part of a partnership approach with the community. We recommend very strongly to the committee that it is important that any strategies and policies that are developed are done in conjunction with the community with which you are working. We held a forum to canvass some views and discuss some of the report findings, which again was not highly attended, but those who did attend were very committed to putting in some ideas for developing strategies around some of the problems we identified. We have also developed a farm safety reference group, which consists of 15 local farmers who are very committed and who act as an advisory group for us to work with. You would probably understand that farmers have very little time to actually be involved in working parties because of their farming work, but those farmers have been invaluable to us in understanding the target group we are working with.

We have also developed some partnerships with the local farming communities. We have contact with around 10 groups in the shire — Landcare groups, VFF representatives and individual farmers — and through this strategy we have been able to develop a real understanding of their perspective. They have been extremely helpful in helping us to understand that. We have also been able to increase some awareness of the issues in a non-threatening way for these groups by going out to meet them where they are located and discussing and debating a lot of things with them and helping discussion happen around some of the issues, which has been extremely important. I hope we have also been able to build some trust with those groups, because traditionally they have been very suspicious and very reluctant to get involved with anyone whom they believe is coming to impose more legislation onto their already difficult working lives. So that has been extremely valuable. We have also started doing some research on barriers to farm safety messages in conjunction with Ballarat University. We are also doing some further research on the cuts, bruises and back injuries in Mitchell as well. We hope that one of the strategies is being here today to act as a bit of an advocate on the farming community’s behalf in terms of some of these farm safety impediments.

To address what is written in the terms of reference, the impediments to sustaining improvements in farm safety, the biggest one we have discovered is the farmers’ fear of legislation. When we first started to do our work we had a lot of trouble going into the groups, because their biggest fear was that anything we found in any of our research would lead to some sort of inappropriate legislation. We want to get that across to the committee — that is, that any policy change or legislation needs to be carefully developed in conjunction with farmers and to allay some of their fears that it is going to have legislation development that is not going to be appropriate and will just make their lives harder. To give some of examples, cattle handling attracts a premium WorkCover rate. There was a fear that if we present to the committee that animal handling injury was very high here, then there may be some resulting legislation out of that for this particular area.

Wages less than $7000 do not attract a WorkCover premium, and family members obviously cannot be entitled to that sort of cover. One example was a son of one of our farmers who was injured in a cattle accident and required major dental work, but they were not covered. Those sorts of things add to the fear of legislation for our farmers. Farmers believe incentives for any kind of farm safety implementation are quite poor. I think there is a 5 per cent incentive if they are deemed to be running a safe and good farm.

The other thing that pinpoints the fear of legislation is that WorkCover has a 3-hour free consultation for farmers, but very few of our farmers have taken that up, and the ones who have taken it up have found it very valuable, but to reiterate: our farmers are very fearful of any legislation or any actions they may need to take that would incur cost. They already struggle with some of those things anyway. That is probably the biggest impedance. The second impediment is the lack of communication between our different types of farmers — that is, the blockies versus the primary farmers. Are our statistics reflecting truly what is happening in the situation? Again, is it to do with the hobby farmers or the broad acres farmers, or is that all a fallacy and it is just across the board? The issue of older and younger farmers is quite an interesting one too. Obviously the younger ones keep up a little bit more with OHS principles. Older farmers tend to rely more on their experience. Obviously there are good points and bad points in that, and they are things that all act as impediments to any improvements.

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Media reporting can be a bit problematic. Certain things that happen on farms can be reported as farm injuries whereas they can be related to other things, such as car accidents coming into their road and things like that. That is something that farmers are very concerned about. On the lack of consultation and communication with farmers around legislative change, farmers do not take up some of those legislative changes very readily, and often that can alienate them. Some of the recent ones, such as the 2-metre height ban legislation, which you would be aware of, did not go down too well with the farmers. One of the comments was, ‘Being told what to do by bureaucrats annoys us intensely’ and, ‘We are not complete idiots’. That is reflective of the fact that they do not feel like they are a part of the consultation process and do not feel that their views have been fully expressed. The other thing around that is that they feel that some of the legislation is across the board and does not specifically relate to the different types of farming that are available, or that they undertake.

There is a lack of consistency across the sector in education on OHS. Certainly some of our contractual farmers find it difficult going into farms that have different principles on OHS and having to work around that. We also mentioned the attitude of inevitability and the acceptance of risk, which is a difficult one to know how to work with, but certainly that is a very big impediment to our farm safety improvements.

The next issue is financial and social cost. Certainly back injury is one that we are very concerned about. It is almost a joke amongst our farmers about their backs. I do not think we have met very many who do not have problems at all. It is almost accepted as part of their working life, but obviously it has some effect on their ability to farm, and that certainly is of concern to us. With cuts, bruises, strains and broken bones, farmers are less inclined to go and seek medical attention. Our research has shown that the lack of them going to seek medical attention means that they are more likely to have long-term effects from those particular injuries. One example was a farmer who has difficulty getting over his bike due to stiffness from an old injury, so we want to try and do some work around that. There is strain on families. Obviously when the main farming person is out of action the rest of the family often has to come in and help. There is also the suffering due to the drought. Obviously that has been augmented, so that is something we need to consider as well.

In terms of further strategies that the committee might like to look at going into, first of all any strategy, policy or legislation needs to be community driven. Farmers believe that there needs to be a more structured approach between farmers and legislators to get across-the-board understanding of where they are coming from. The legislation should be developed in close consultation with farmers in specific farming-type areas, so it needs to be a one-does-not-fit-all approach. The other thing is that misinformation can often be deflected and assisted by some sort of discussion. We believe our work amongst farmers has had some benefit in that we have been able to understand the issues and talk through the different perspectives, and that has been very valuable. For the committee to understand that concept would be very valuable. Legislation needs to take into account industry type and the substantial difficulties that farmers already face — for instance, working alone as is often the case — and the many tasks under many different circumstances that farmers have to do. That needs to be understood around legislative developments.

In terms of resource support, our farmers believe that there needs to be more financial support for both research specific to certain localised areas and also around data collection. We have done a bit of work around that, but certainly there needs to be some research how we can collect good data around farm injuries for localised areas. Whether we work with the hospitals or the division of general practice, how are we going to set up systems that do that? Monash University has an accident research centre which has a number of different tools that can be used, but we need some support to be able to see how we can implement them in our areas so that we know if we are having an effect on some of these fatalities and injuries.

Obviously financial incentives for safe farm implementation would be very useful, and that not only goes towards financial support but also support in terms of incentives for insurance and other incentives as well. That would go a long way to helping implementation. There is also the acknowledgment of time put into consultation. Sometimes we can take for granted that farmers are just willing to provide input into these processes, whereas it is taking away from their time and their ability to farm, and acknowledging what they have to offer and their expertise in the same way that we would acknowledge anyone else’s expertise. Sometimes we overlook that.

An idea farmers have given to us for legislative support is that when property changes hands, particularly around hobby farmers coming up and having land, if they could have some kind of kit or have to complete an OHS requirement before they go onto the land, that would certainly be very useful. Consistent requirements across the industry would also be useful. With insurance issues, the recommendation is to look again at the way insurance is
structured for farmers. WorkCover needs to be better set up for farmers to be better able to help them, so some work needs to be done around that.

And last of all, in relation to education, our farmers believe that education courses should be counted towards lower insurance premiums. I am not sure, but I think that may apply in some areas. Education should not be mandated for some of the more experienced farmers, because some of the courses go over a lot of old ground, which increases the degree of frustration the farmers feel. If experienced farmers are off their farms for a day or two days to attend a course and they are going over a lot of stuff they have already been over, but which they have to do in order to get their certificate so they can keep on farming, that can be quite frustrating. If some of those courses were more relevant it would be very, very useful to the farmers.

There is no OHS training requirement in some of the agricultural courses, and we believe that would be a useful thing for farmers to learn and understand before they actually get out onto the farms. Some course subsidisation would also be useful as well. Many of our farmers believe that our young people are our future, which I think is true, and they suggest including within curriculums some education that covers farm safety issues for our young people in regional areas, because they carry messages very well to the older farmers. They are some of the recommendations we would like to make to the committee.

Mr McQUILTEN — Do you have any comments about how often accidents occur with ATVs in your region?

Ms LINTON — Yes, I can give you that information. When we have gone to talk to farmers they have told us that ATV accidents are quite common because of the hilly terrain in some of our areas. We know of quite a serious ATV accident that happened over the past year. I can show you the statistics we have for ATVs.

Ms JOINER — There is also some contention around whether or not injuries involving ATVs are actually farm injuries or whether they involve people who come up for pleasure on the weekends and who are unfamiliar with the vehicles but who take them out and get injured. Those injuries are going to be reflected in the farm injury statistics, when in actual fact they are probably the result of recreational pursuits.

Mr McQUILTEN — If an accident happens on the farm, it is a farm injury, is it not?

Ms JOINER — If it happens on a farm it is a farm injury, but the farmers are finding that these types of injury are reflecting back on them as bad farmers, when in actual fact they can just be caused by some overexuberant visitors.

Mr INGRAM — You indicated there was a fairly low number of respondents. Did you consider doing a reality test on that sort of information just by doing a phone poll and directly targeting a small number of farmers to check if the figures were accurate, or do you say that is a more broader next step? We have heard this evidence from a couple of areas where groups have done mail-outs, but they have told us, ‘We didn’t get a lot of returns, so we don’t necessarily know how accurate it is’. Can you comment on that?

Ms LINTON — Yes. We are following up now with a phone survey, which we are about to conduct in the next few weeks. We have actually gone out to the groups and said to them, ‘This is how we would like to follow up’. The other thing we did around our report is we went out to a number of the different groups and obtained some qualitative data as well. So we verified some of the things they were saying, and in fact our qualitative and our quantitative data reflect each other in some of the comments that have been made. So we did ‘validate’ the report from that point of view, and we certainly have good contact with the farmers now. Just recently, in the last three weeks, we have been visiting the Landcare groups fairly extensively, and we have reported back some of these findings and got verification on some of those issues, particularly around the area of legislation. Some of the farmers are telling us that animal injury is not as high as we are representing, but given that this area has such a large predominance of livestock farming, we still believe it is probably one of the most concerning areas, and certainly that is a concern to all the respondents we have spoken to.

Mr INGRAM — In the first line of your executive summary you say that the Mitchell shire has an unusually high rate of injury in relation to other rural areas. Can you pin down why that is? Arguably Gippsland has similar hilly terrain and livestock-type agricultural production, so have you compared your rate of injury with other areas and tried to work out whether it is due to farming activities? Can you comment on that?
Ms LINTON — We have had difficulty doing that. We have not compared our rate of injury to other areas. We are having awful trouble gaining statistics on what these kinds of injuries are, so we have virtually had to do our survey on a small scale to try to get an understanding of what is happening. It has been very difficult for us to do that, and we are only really at the beginning of what we are trying to find out.

We could speculate about what some of those things are — for example, a high number of hobby farmers coming north — but we do not know. That is all just speculation about what is contributing to that rate, so we really do not know why we have such a high rate of injury in this area. Again, those statistics do not break down farm injury for us; they just say ‘a high rate of injury’. We are just combining that with the knowledge we have as a community health service, from seeing how many injuries are reported here in the newspapers and from talking to our farmers. We really are just surmising some of those things. It is very difficult without real data input.

One of our recommendations is that we find some real data to be able to compare the hobby farmers with broadacre farmers to see if there really are some statistics that support the fact that the rate might be due to hobby farmers, but we are having real difficulty finding the statistics to make some clear conclusions about that.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Marg., Lisa and Veronica, for all the preliminary work you have done for us. You will receive a copy of the transcript, and when you receive that you can make corrections to fact or grammar but not to matters of substance. Thank you very much.

Ms LINTON — Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.