CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into cause of fatality and injury on Victorian farms

Kerang – 23 March 2004

Members
Mr M. P. Crutchfield    Mr R. G. Mitchell
Mr B. P. Hardman        Dr D. V. Napthine
Mr C. Ingram            Mr P. L. Walsh
Mr J. M. McQuilten

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Witness
Dr G. Keogh (sworn).
The CHAIR — I declare open this hearing of the Rural and Regional Services Development Committee into the cause of fatality and injury on Victorian farms. I thank everyone for their attendance here 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 witnesses that any comments made by witnesses outside the committee’s hearings are not protected by parliamentary privilege.

This is an all-party parliamentary committee that includes members from the Liberal and National parties and an Independent member.

I welcome Dr Greg Keogh. Dr Keogh, I ask you to provide your full name and address for the purposes of Hansard and also state whether you are attending today in a private capacity or whether you are representing the Murray Plains Division of General Practice.

Dr KEOGH — No, I am here in a private capacity really.

The CHAIR — All your evidence will be taken down and will become public evidence in due course.

Dr KEOGH — My full name is Dr Gregory Thomas Keogh. I am a general medical practitioner registered in the states of Victoria and New South Wales. I practise at 47 Victoria Street, Kerang, and also at Barham, New South Wales. I actually live in New South Wales at Cobwell Station, Sandys Bridge Road, Barham.

The CHAIR — I invite you to make an introductory presentation, after which members will ask some questions.

Dr KEOGH — I believe farm safety on Victorian farms will improve when the farmers can afford to allocate income to accident and illness prevention. It is all very well for consumers to want green, clean and organic food. The farmers are only too willing to supply this, but it has to be economical, and in particular it has to be safely produced. Consumers have to realise that whilst they are willing to pay extra for so-called organic and other label products they also may need to pay a premium if they want Australian farmers to produce the products in a safe manner. A survey done by the Murray Plains Division of General Practice some years ago showed that only 16.2 per cent of the injured indicated that they had any kind of safety equipment in use at the time of their accident.

We need to know and understand why farmers and their employees take risks, particularly when they take obviously preventable risks. For instance, very few farmers wear gloves. It appears to be a combination of both inconvenience at times and perceived toughness. Why do they not wear gloves? Why do they not wear appropriate headgear? For example, when I worked in North Queensland in the Royal Flying Doctor Service over two years in the mid-1970s five people died from head injuries. All of them were not wearing helmets and all of them had fallen off horses. The types of people killed ranged from expert bushman jockeys to complete novices. In discussions with the mothers at the particular times they said they could keep the appropriate headgear on the children until they were about 10 or 12 and then they started to act like adults and had to wear the bushman’s hat.

Whilst I recognise that the motivation for protecting children on farms is most important, I believe safety on farms for adults should be the starting and finishing point, so that those children grow up to be safe farming adults. For this reason I think we have to concentrate as much, if not even more, on keeping the adults safe and changing their practices so they are safe. The statistics that were produced at the ‘Danger on the Farm — Community Responsibility’ conference that was held in Echuca in 1996 all came from data from the coroner, major hospitals and their emergency departments and Workcover. It did not cover the family farmer who was self-employed or his family or others.

The Murray Plains Division of General Practice did a survey in 1998–99, I think, when we looked at what we general practitioners of this area treated. We found that approximately 96 per cent of the farm injuries were treated by us in our local hospitals and in our surgeries. We were treating the so-called minor injuries. For instance, just yesterday I saw a farmer who fell off his motorbike. He has three cracked ribs, but he is back on his tractor now or on his motorbike because he has to keep the water going. If he was employed under Workcover or was an employee he would be off for three of four weeks — or if he was a government servant I do not know how long he would be off for!
People who have escaped through the net of these statistics have been the fully self-employed farmers, their families, their children, their parents and their visitors, and in particular the elderly grandparents. There has been many a time that I have had to argue, discuss, dissuade and even refuse to give a heavy-duty vehicle licence to an elderly grandfather who only wants to drive it in the paddock at harvest time, which is of course the most likely time that he is going to make a mistake, fall off something and injure himself or somebody else. These people are not covered by Workcover. Then there are a large number of people whom they employ by gratuity or whom they do not put on their books because they do not want to be caught on the insurance side of things.

The farmers feel they cannot afford personal accident insurance; they cannot afford to cover their families, and they cannot afford to employ people on the records. They are afraid of the cost of Workcover, and in particular they are afraid of the cost of having to pay wages for a considerable time after an injury. They are afraid of occupational health and safety legislation, and particularly now the penalties of environmental law. The so-called right to farm appears to be developing into a licence to farm, and that comes with restrictions, and particularly restrictions from the special interest groups and everything. That come right into it.

Consumers and farmers need to be educated that the farmers in this country actually live in what could be called a primary production food factory. No other group that I am aware of actually live in the middle of their factory. The farmers have to be encouraged and enabled to plan economically to provide for their home or their abode on their farm to be separate both physically, aesthetically and psychologically from the working part of the farm. This has to be done so that they have a sanctuary inside of the farm that they and their visitors can come to and know that that it is the safe part of the farm and that business does not occur there; and when they go outside the farm they go to a dangerous area and have to wear and use the appropriate gear and act appropriately. This needs to be done, because Australian farmers live quite differently in many cases to other farmers. I will not bother to go into the historical reasons for this, but there are some economic reasons that could be brought into play for the farmers to be able to make this attempt to change things. My submission that I have just handed around discusses ways these things could be achieved.

We, the rural doctors, nurses and ambulance officers, want to see our farmers contented and happy, not depressed and injured. Yesterday I saw a lady who was depressed not only because of the drought and because of her debt but also purely and simply because of the whole situation on the farm that she is on. So that was only one day ago that I saw two people with serious problems related to the problems of farming.

I believe we can educate people, as I have suggested by the methods 1 and 2 recommended in my submission. Do you want me to read them out or just refer to them? As my submission states, I believe there is a need to educate both the public and the farmers as outlined in items 1 and 2. The farmers need security for themselves in regard to farming injuries and illnesses by allowing self-employed farmers to be covered by Workcover, as suggested in item 3.

We as a community need to show our farmers that we need them to be continuing to practise their farming efforts in a health and safety way by collecting appropriate data, which is items 3 and 5. Then we need to be able to provide suitable protective equipment, which is item 6. The farmers are now afraid of drought, debt and destitution, especially those caught by legislation that affects them when their needs and opinions appear to be completely ignored. Farmers are afraid of the red tape, the form filling and the work penalties that cover Workcover, occupational health and particularly the environmental law. We hope this inquiry comes a long way to address that.

In conclusion farm safety has come a long way since I was a young fellow in the mountains around north-east Victoria when I was informed by a mountain bushman that there are only four things to be afraid of in the bush: the heels of a horse, the horns of a bull, a circular saw and your mother-in-law.

The CHAIR — Thanks very much, Greg.

Mr Ingram — Item 3 of your submission is that Workcover should be extended to cover all Victorian farmers and their families who are living and working on the farms. You have just commented that farmers are reluctant to take up income protection, or perhaps for economic reasons do not take it up.

Dr Keogh — That is right.

Mr Ingram — Obviously Workcover would impose a financial penalty on farmers. Do you think farmers would take it up? Would we have to do it through regulation and legislation? How would we do it, and
what would be the acceptance of such a measure? I understand the reasons for it, but do you have a comment on how it would be accepted?

Dr KEOGH — On the practicalities of it? Obviously you are asking what the premiums are likely to be in such a situation. I do not know; you would have to go to Workcover. But on the premise of the community needing to subsidise the farmers in some way to produce this clean, safe and organic food, there should be some way of organising the premiums so that they can be afforded. As I said before, the problem you have is that you have a farmer who has one employee. If they both get injured in the same incident, the employee goes on getting his income and security through Workcover and the farmer is getting nothing. We cover them obviously through Medicare and things like that, but in real terms for their financial security they are getting nothing.

Mr McQUILLEN — I noticed a number of ATVs when driving into town today. There are a number of them advertised out the front on a nature strip. Are you having any accidents with ATVs up here?

Dr KEOGH — Yes, we do. We have had quite a few. A lot of them are unreported. I had one young man a few years ago — I do not know whether it was an ATV or a motorbike — who was in a channel upside down with a broken leg and managed to get out of that all right. We have had two deaths across the border in the last six months from ATVs — that is in New South Wales, in the Wakool area. Usually they come from being rolled and obviously from the head injury when they are thrown off. There have been big arguments, as you aware, as to whether to put roll bars on them and all that sort of business, but whether that is practical or satisfactory I am not sure.

The wearing of headgear is a particular problem because, as I say somewhere else, everybody seems to require one hat to fit every occasion and every farmer, but that is just impossible. Wearing a proper full-size motorbike hat for the whole day mustering, they just will not do it. There needs to be a way of providing headgear that is acceptable to farmers in Victoria and farmers in northern Queensland rather than trying to design one to fit everyone. This is where the legislation seems to be a problem at times — that is, they have to comply to all the various Australian design rules and things like that. No-one seems to be able to say, ‘It is better for them to wear partial headgear or partial stuff than to wear nothing at all’, which is what they seem to do now. Motorbike helmets and all that sort of business are okay, but they do not protect from sunburn and various other things. If you could have a helmet — and the technology is there — that had two-way communication at the same time as protecting them from sun and that sort of thing — and it could be made cooler — then it should be done. I do not understand —

For instance, you can make your hell’s angels wear bike helmets all day, and you can make construction workers wear hard hats in Darwin, so there has to be a way that the farmers can feel comfortable in wearing hard hats themselves.

Getting back to the Workcover business, you have the situation where farmers can make their employees wear them. They have trouble making their employees wear all sorts of protective gear, but they do not wear them themselves.

Mr WALSH — Somewhere in your submission you talk about the issue of visors on helmets and neck injuries. Was that in your submission?

Dr KEOGH — No, I do not think I talked about visors. As I understand the argument for visors on all helmets, the hard part of it is the hyperextension injury. If you are hit and your head goes back, that is when you give yourself quadriplegia. That is the argument.

Dr NAPTHINE — I was impressed some years ago when Murray Plains Division did that farm safety survey. It was a very good survey. About two years ago you were looking for additional funding from Workcover to complete it. I even remember raising the issue in Parliament on behalf of the division. I gather from what you have recommended that no funding has been forthcoming and there has been no further work done. Fundamentally are you looking for funding for that?

Dr KEOGH — That is true. I was not privy or involved in the discussions with Workcover. Tricia Currie, who is sitting behind me, was at the division at the time and would be able to answer your question more specifically. Nowadays what we are asking is to be able to go back and revisit what we originally did to see whether there has been change and things like that, but the other thing we need to look at concerns illnesses that are caused by working on farms. I had a chap in today. He had sinusitis and asthma from working in the sheep yards
yesterday with dust everywhere — those sorts of illnesses. Skin cancers and other illnesses are caused by farming. We know they are caused by it. The Australian Centre for Agricultural Health and Safety in Moree has statistics on all those sorts of bits and pieces. We were looking to the division both to continue our survey and to expand it to other divisions. The Murray Plains Division has a certain degree of agricultural pursuits. Other divisions, such as the north-east, have different sorts. The south-west has different sorts. We had the program, the intellectual property and the computer set-up to be able to easily expand to these people so that we could get a perspective of what was being treated on Victorian farms by the general practitioners.

Dr KEOGH — I mention education at the primary school level, and that is being done in certain places. Again Tricia Currie and other people are doing it in this area, and it is being done at a lot of other places elsewhere. Education is a long-term effect of doing things. Just by way of example, a number of years ago I was at a VFF meeting and we had a little booth on skin cancers. It was interesting. The older farmers were only worried about what may have occurred, but the younger blokes were coming up and saying, ‘How do I prevent it?’ Education over the long term is the way of dealing with it, but it is not just the education of the farmers. You have 100 per cent of people — well, not 100 per cent — —

Going back further, years ago people always had a relative, a friend or a cousin on farms. Nowadays with people in the city you have got two or three generations who would not know where milk comes from. That is the difficulty, you have to educate them as well so that they understand it; the push to develop healthy or safe farming must come from different directions.

Talking again about how you can do it, the dollars have got to come into it somewhere. There has to be some way of reducing the cost of farm safety equipment, reducing the cost of designing it, reducing the legislation of things that have to be worn so that you do not have to design a camel to wear on your head, and possibly subsidising insurance premiums for farmers, either privately or through Workcover.

Mr INGRAM — The committee heard evidence at Horsham in relation to education. You spoke about education, and you also spoke — and this is mentioned in some of the articles that you have provided to the committee — about the attitude to risk-taking or identifying risks on farms. One of the measures that was put forward at Horsham was to join the gap — basically, you can get to the schoolchildren — but that is a slow process, and you have also identified that. One way suggested was actually to get parents to bring their schoolchildren on a day at the weekend, so that you actually bridge that gap — in other words, you are not only getting the children coming along but you are also trying to drag the parents along. Do you see that as a potential way? Obviously it is about making farmers recognise that some of the activities they are carrying out are risky. The committee is just trying to work out how you get that message across as easily and as quickly as possible to the people who are taking the risks.

Dr KEOGH — I think that is one way, but I think you will find the mothers coming, not the fathers, particularly the farmers. That is a long-term process for doing it. One of the ways of looking at it is with the field days. Children, parents and families usually go along, and you can encourage farm safety things in one particular area on those field days. I am talking about physical areas, so that you do not have them scattered all over the place. In that way you have one particular area that school groups, farmers and families can go to, and everybody can see them at the place. I went to the Elmore field days a number of years ago and did skin spot checks. I felt like the Pied Piper at one stage, because the ABC wanted to interview me and I had to go outside, and I had this tribe of people following me, all wanting to get their skin checks done.

I mention that because you could get doctors to go to these things, but now you have this legal thing that means that if you go there and see somebody who you find has a skin cancer but does not do anything about it, you will be sued. That sort of thing needs to be taken away. We are all happy to go along on that particular basis to the field days in the areas. The divisions could find doctors to go to them, but you have to remove this ridiculous thing whereby if you give someone advice on an almost gratuitous basis they will be able to sue you. I have had the situation where I did a skin check on one field day and it was a minister of the Crown who had a skin cancer. I think I had to chase him up to make sure he attended to it. But that is one prohibitive factor.
To answer your question, I think field days are one way, and I think that needs to go a little bit further. Farm safety action groups and farm safety management days need to be made better and more approachable to farmers and their families, in that I believe there has to be some sort of financial way that they can benefit from them, so they can get all their licences in one hit or whatever.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Dr Keogh. Your evidence has been very useful. In a couple of weeks you will receive a copy of the transcript, in which you may correct small matters of fact or grammar but not matters of substance. Thank you.

Witness withdrew.