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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Witness
Mr G. Kelly, Chief Executive Officer, Robinvale District Health Services(sworn).
The CHAIR — 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, under the provisions of the Constitution Act is 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, including members from the Liberal and National parties and an Independent member.

Mr Kelly, I invite you to give your full name and address, the organisation you represent and your position in that organisation.

Mr KELLY — My full name is Graem William Kelly, and I am chief executive officer of the Robinvale District Health Services, 15 Nicholls Street, Robinvale.

The CHAIR — I invite you to make some brief comments, and members will ask some questions afterwards.

Mr KELLY — In terms of attacking the farm safety issues I think you probably have to work through a risk-management strategy and identify some categories of farm equipment. That has already been done historically with chainsaws et cetera, where those have been identified as a statistical issue. As risk management in all the industries is becoming paramount and regulated as per standards, I suggest you actually get a working party to identify some categories or levels where you identify, through statistical evidence rather than just farm field sort of stuff, the categories you would like to allocate. It may be, for example, a level 5 being a low-level risk; level 4 a smaller risk; a level 3 a fair risk, and so on. Then you could have particular standards and possibly labelling on equipment which would actually refer to those things. Out of that I think you can build the basis on which you can actually try to address the systems of managing the farm risks. But if you do not have some sort of categorisation or classification on which you wish to develop you will not have a basis on which to form some sort of action. That would be my approach to farm safety: I would identify the potential risks, categorise them and then come forward with a potential system of managing it.

The system of managing it may be a simple as having an elective approach with a high category 1, say, being where you have to have some sort of formal education and some possible licence before being allowed to engage; and with the others you may have, depending on the degree, some formal education in the way in which they are used, so you would have a structured approach to it rather some ad hoc, meaningless sort of guesswork.

It is very difficult for the employers, farmers and others to get a sense of what the realities are in terms of the risks because statistically we all know that they do not show up in terms of farm evidence, in a region or whatever. You have to take that bigger, broader statistical base to see where the potential risks lie.

In terms of assisting, I would probably put it back onto the insurance companies to assist you in trying to better manage the process of farm safety and actually come at it using a carrot approach, where through the assistance of the Victorian Farmers Federation (VFF), government involvement and insurance company involvement, you set up a program. I do not know whether any members of the committee are aware of the five-star type of approach which was done in health previously. This is only a basis; it is not the actually form in which you would approach a farm, but you could break it up and make it so that people could electively go into it and possibly see some reduction in their insurance or even Workcover premiums. In other words, you would need to actually some incentives for them to engage in the process and electively put in place some reporting systems. You may be able to localise it in the local government areas, where you have it like the food safety type of programs, where they electively may become a registered body and may be categorised, again under a level where it has some positive benefits in terms of their insurance, Workcover premiums et cetera. That approach is more of an encouraging sort of thing, engaging with insurance companies which have a shared ownership of it, engaging government and engaging the farmers and the farming bodies, such as the VFF, growers groups et cetera, to actually assist in trying to develop the program, because from region to region there would be different sorts of issues that are particular to that region.

I want to touch on chemical safety. I will come back to the equipment a bit later. Chemical safety has probably just touched on the precipice of what probably needs to happen. I would look at it as the bigger picture, not only in...
terms of safety but also in terms of the employers and employees having some system of tracking where the chemical use is occurring. We had an incident probably two years ago where there was farm poisoning from a block that was beside it. There was no evidence of what the chemicals were; there was difficulty in chasing it around. Then there is no historical follow-up as to what chemicals are there. I would see it also see it in terms of saleability. With the farm concerned, nobody knows what chemicals that previous farmer has used unless they do a soil test.

My suggestion is to treat in much the same way as we treat sterilised products: we put it back to the manufacturer to create an open database. Of course it would have to protect confidentiality; it might be housed in some sort of centre with Internet access and so on. The farmer could choose to put the data on the Internet or have it in paper form. But I would approach it in this way: with each drum of chemicals sold there would be a listing; you would have to have the licence with which to purchase it, so there would be a tracking-following system; the labels would go; the farmer would have employees who would have a poisons passport; you would pull off the sticker and put it in their passport with a date, so that they would know what they have come into contact with; the farmer puts it in his register or registers it on a web page or whatever, so it would go to a central database; and then you would have a tracking system forever and a day in terms of chemical use.

This system could probably help with research and so on as well if some data needed to be gathered about whether a chemical was potentially dangerous in the longer term. Of course, a lot of them build up in body fats and so on and so have a long time in which they build up. We know from the asbestos debacle that you need some sort of basis on which to come back and track those sorts of things. That is a simple methodology: you put it back to the manufacturing groups to create a central database, create a passport for workers which they take from place to place and which enables them to know what chemicals they have come in contact with; in terms of his record the farmer on the plot would have a record of what chemicals he has had there, where he has put them, and there would be a central database registered. That is a simple methodology to come up with that.

To come back to the equipment. The reason why I have a heart for risk management is that I am from the Mallee, and I have known of grain silo incidents where twins were killed at Wycheproof, and where recently a guy was killed at Boort, and so on. Unless you engage in a continual addressing and assessment process you are wasting your time, unless there is some commercial venture to it. While occupational health and safety programs are nice as a postage stamp, we all know that in a week or two weeks those sorts of things drop off.

Unless there is continuous encouragement — and it does not have to be a stick-type methodology — to engage in these processes and undertake some sort of education with some benefit being seen for both sides, it will not stick. Short-term programs are all very nice, but they do not lock in the memory. You need people to be constantly reinvested in that so that there is benefit and engagement in the process.

I probably would also support it with all the other things that you are going to hear in terms of school education and things like that, but unless you build a basis of which there was some sort of annual or biannual review that would encourage people to become engaged, you are really going to push shit up hill, for want of a better phrase.

With human nature being what it is, we are risk takers unless we are encouraged to take it in other ways. Human nature is very lazy. The other thing I would look at in terms of weights and measures et cetera is the manufacturing industries in terms of risk analysis and looking at whether the quantities in which they are selling products are appropriate. Sometimes you have to take the choice of potential risk away from the individual and come up with packaging et cetera which reduces risk. You may sell something in 20-kilo bags; you may sell it in 10-kilo bags, and I can understand that, but you may move people to buying in bulk so there is some eradication of potential risks in terms of manual handling et cetera. I could go on, but I had better stop because you have only got 10 minutes.

The CHAIR — Graem, thanks very much for that. You have given us some great food for thought for recommendations, which is great.

Mr WALSH — Putting your hospital hat on, what sorts of farm accidents and injuries would be presenting at the hospital here? Are we talking about chemicals? Is there anything you want to add?

Mr KELLY — Again it is very difficult. If you talk to anybody in terms of hospitals you will get fads of things, as you know. There are a lot of near misses, which of course are not reported. I have seen a guy working on silos come through one of the V-bottoms, and a young child sitting at the top. People do not realise that wheat,
unlike water, draws from the top rather than feeding down at a level point. Wheat actually sucks in. I have seen my father pull a 12-year-old child who was stuck across the crankshaft by both legs aside with the wheat all on top of him. He reached under and pulled him out. I am aware of incidents with the field bins. There are simple measures that can be taken in terms of controlling field bins, such as raising the height of the ladder so children cannot climb them. An adult male may be able to get up them but a child will not. You may put on a specific locking mechanisms so they are childproof on certain items.

Poisoning is a major one. Dams are always dangerous, as are PTOs, which we all know have dangerous elements. They have been a continual problem, and they will continue to be a problem unless we assist people in assessing them. There was the recent farm death of a gentleman. There are a number of ways of people getting around your safety mechanisms. They will put a screwdriver across a starter motor because it is bodgie so as to start the damn thing, and then they wonder why they get run over. I am aware of a guy back home where I come from, in Wycheproof. He did that exact thing. Of course he was pulverised and the tractor went round and round in circles.

There are a number of what you would say in hindsight are particularly silly injuries which could have been avoided. But I do not know how looking at them as a service provider you could manage them on total because they happen in such an ad hoc way. I might see a chemical poisoning only once in 10 years, and I might see a silo injury or a PTO injury once every 15 years, or something of nature. Of course in the Mallee we are dealing with populations with very small bases so statistically it is not showing up, unless you cover the whole state or Australia, because the industry as we all know is quite high in terms of Workcover injury, which has been expressed.

Mr McQUILTEN — What about ATV injuries? You have talked about other incidents. What about injuries involving ATVs?

Mr KELLY — We see some, and most of them are minor, but with some injuries that come in they do not necessarily tell you how they caused them. They might say, ‘I just had an accident’. So in terms of the evidence taken in terms of farm injuries it is probably about record keeping that is actually followed up.

Mr INGRAM — On that, is the current available data good enough?

Mr KELLY — No. In a farm situation, as we all know, there is a very collegial association within a small group, especially in dryland farming. If you spoke to one employee, they have got a long history et cetera, and they have a close, almost family relationship. Often it is a family relationship. It could be the son, the cousin, the wife — whatever. They will not be processing a WorkCover case; they will just say it is an injury. They will not seek to address it appropriately, and you are not going to get the evidence, because we still have that great Australian idiom, ‘She’ll be right, mate!’ It is one of those things et cetera.

So you have got no proper way of keeping good hard statistics. That is what happens. You really need to know near misses as much as anything else as well, and you are not going to be able to collate that, and that is the difficult part. That is why I am suggesting that you probably need to do an analysis in terms of risk, categorise it and possibly put in some restrictions. I heard you talk of ATVs. You might say on a sticker for an ATV that it is a category 1, for example, and that there will be weight limits, or that only one person can use it. You may have that all in, like you would with your chemical register, about what restrictions you have on the use of that sort of equipment. It is very difficult for me as a single health provider which services a community with a catchment of probably 8000. My population alone is not statistically sound enough to give me much evidence. And you have the same problem in taking evidence from regions — that is, that most farms are fairly isolated and you are not getting straight-up data that is as reliable as you would like.

Mr McQUILTEN — Is your gut feeling that ATV accidents are under-reported?

Mr KELLY — You have heard that people will take risks. I am sure that it is underreported. There could be broken limbs of children et cetera that are not expressed in terms of those. You have an unregulated quantity. People have free and open use in terms of farm use, so you are not going to get them reported. But the problem is that even if you actually regulate it to some degree, it is not going to help you. Because it is in-house, they are not going to report an injury because of their fears of the ramifications of reporting it. So you have to introduce some educational process and some system of actually assisting them to better manage those risks.

Dr NAPTHINE — Can I change the subject slightly? You talked before about chemical databases.
Mr KELLY — Yes.

Dr NAPTHINE — I am at the other end of the chemical chain. What is the current situation with regard to the collection of disused drums or the collection of half-used or quarter-used chemicals that have passed their use-by date which farmers want to get rid of? Is there a process for them to be collected safely?

Mr KELLY — It is more council based, and I understand that councils only do it in an ad hoc way. I can correct it if it is not right. But I do not believe that there is much encouragement in terms of the companies buying back unused quantities or waste products. You probably heard, and I have actually seen it, when they have actually been sitting in dams. I have relatives who are on farms et cetera where they tend to have their own personal dumps, and they will dump things.

Mr McQUILTEN — On the farm?

Mr KELLY — Yes. The problem you come up with there is that you could buy the land later on and you do not know what is there. The problem that is probably even more so in terms of sales of primary produce is what chemicals have been on that property prior to you going there. So probably you are quite right, your are touching on more a cash-exchange system where there may be a deposit in terms of the drum so that you actually get the product back, make it attractive for them to take the drums back. You put a $5 deposit on the drum, then it is taken back and you come up with a system which will address it, then you have fixed your problem. Make it attractive for them to take it back. You used to get your lemonade bottles back when you had a dollar for it.

Mr McQUILTEN — You still do in South Australia.

The CHAIR — Graem, thank you very much. That was good, and you have confirmed something that somebody else said to us earlier on today.

Mr KELLY — Hopefully that was of some value.

The CHAIR — You will get a copy of the transcript.

Committee adjourned.