RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into cause of fatality and injury on Victorian farms

Sea Lake – 24 March 2004

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Witness
Ms T. Marchant, Health Promotion Officer, Swan Hill District Hospital (sworn).
The CHAIR — Would you mind for the purpose of producing a transcript giving your full name and address, the name of the organisation you work for and your position in that organisation.

Ms MARCHANT — My name is Tameaka Dawne Marchant. I am a health promotion officer for the Swan Hill District Hospital.

The CHAIR — Could you please give us some brief comments, then we will ask you some questions.

Ms MARCHANT — Two years ago we decided through presentations at the emergency department and through requests from schools and other organisations to do education around farm safety. We began doing individual school programs and developed a program for grade 3 students called the Country Kids program, which was held at the Pental Island Caravan Park and Holiday Farm just out of Swan Hill. From these sessions it became obvious that children knew what to do regarding farm safety. We could say, ‘Do you wear your helmet?’, and they would say, ‘Yes’. We would ask, ‘Are you allowed to ride on the tractors?’, and they would say, ‘We know that is bad’. But I would end up finding out that they knew what to do, but they were going home and their parents were telling them they were allowed to do something else.

We have also found in the past that one-off sessions do not work. They leave us thinking, ‘Yes, we are going to be safe’, but a week later they are back doing what they normally do on the farms. At the beginning of 2004 we developed a survey; 180 surveys were distributed throughout the Swan Hill district, including Sea Lake. These surveys were around farming behaviours with children. For example, we asked, ‘Do children on your farm ride ATVs, ride as passengers on tractors or swim unsupervised?’ This survey was also used as a needs assessment of whether farmers would be willing to attend a forum on child safety on farms, to which 73.5 per cent said they would not. It also asked whether they would be interested in attending a general farm safety session, to which 47 per cent said they would. The top three topics that they would like covered in these sessions included first aid, the responsibility of the contractor and back care. Other areas included: educating children on farm safety; prevention of drowning; and slips and falls prevention. The majority of respondents would like the sessions held in Sea Lake, Ultima or Swan Hill. This year we would like to work more closely with the Victorian Farmers Federation, because we feel that as an organisation we can organise these forums, but we do not have the skills or expertise to get up and speak on these topics.

Mr INGRAM — We have a copy of the survey. I notice they were due back on 8 March.

Ms MARCHANT — Yes.

Mr INGRAM — What percentage of them were returned?

Ms MARCHANT — We sent out around about 180 and we got 34 back; I do not know what percentage that is.

Mr INGRAM — I suppose you have not had a lot of time to get a précis of it, but generally with the ones you have got back, are they positive and understanding?

Ms MARCHANT — Basically most of them have said that rarely do children ride on the tractors or do stuff like that. Most of them have come back and said that they are complying with safety issues. Whether or not they are wanting to attend a forum is sort of half and half. I think 47 per cent said that they would attend a general farm safety forum.

Mr INGRAM — I suppose just getting the survey into the houses would jolt a few people to think about some of these issues. That was part of it as well.

Ms MARCHANT — Yes, it was.

Dr NAPHTHINE — You said that this whole project was initiated a couple of years ago because of what the hospital was seeing through its accident and emergency department and its wards. What sorts of things were being seen and what are the issues that the hospital identified as farm safety issues?
Ms MARCHANT — I am not really sure, but I think there were a lot broken legs from motorbike accidents. There have been a few fatalities around the Swan Hill area involving young people on motorbikes, but besides that I do not really know.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — ATVs?

Ms MARCHANT — Yes, I think one was an ATV, but that is going back a while.

Mr INGRAM — I would not consider that a great response back from the survey, but that is typical of some of the mail-out surveys you get. Obviously it is a first step, but what is the next stage of trying to get that message followed up? Are you going to send letters back out to some of those people just to remind them about the survey?

Ms MARCHANT — We probably will not get any more back; we will be happy with the 34 that we have got. We will probably do something in the Guardian about what we found. It is all confidential, so we cannot go back to the people we got them back from and report back to them. From now I will send out the results to the VFF and to anyone else who wants the results, and we will try to work together about what we can do from there on.

Mr INGRAM — You have to concede that, if people are complying with better farm safety, then the results are arguably skewed, so it might paint a better picture than the reality.

Ms MARCHANT — It is like all things; you always preach to the converted. The ones who are already doing the right thing are the ones who are willing to come along to things.

Mr INGRAM — Maybe a better approach is a smaller sample. Maybe you could do a doorknock and sit down with people and fill it in so you get a 100 per cent return from the questionnaire.

Ms MARCHANT — We could do that, but we do not have the time.

Mr CRUTCHFIELD — Have you thought of phone polling?

Ms MARCHANT — No. It would be very hard to get people’s phone numbers, as well. What we did to distribute the surveys, the drought relief worker took them out to Sea Lake and Ultima, and they dropped them off with the mail run. They did it through contacts we knew on farms. We did an article for the Guardian if anyone wanted to fill it out, because the VFF was kind enough to donate a $100 prize.

Dr NAPTHINE — Are you originally from the Swan Hill area?

Ms MARCHANT — I grew up in Lake Charm, which is not far from Swan Hill.

Dr NAPTHINE — On the land?

Ms MARCHANT — No.

Dr NAPTHINE — From your own personal experience growing up in rural Victoria, what do you see as the major risks on farms for the under-5s and for the 5 to 20-year-olds?

Ms MARCHANT — I never grew up on a farm, but I did grow up out of town. From hearing what a lot of young people say, it is the motorbikes and riding in the backs of utes. From talking to young people I know there have been a few deaths, such as someone falling out the back of a ute. We grew up out of town, and we did all that. We had a motorbike. We rode in the back of a ute whenever we went anywhere. We did all those sorts of things.

Dr NAPTHINE — With due respect, you are still relatively young and you are talking to your peer group. How do you tell groups of 13 to 15-year-olds that they should wear a helmet when they ride their ATVs around the farm or that girls should wear their crash hats when they ride their horses or that they should not ride around in the back of a ute on a farm? With due respect, I know my children of that age would probably tell me, ‘Get real, Dad!’.

As a young person, how do you convey that message? We know what the message is, but how do you get the young people to take it seriously?
Ms MARCHANT — You have to do it in a program that is aimed at them, which is very hard. You have to show them statistics — how many people do die, that it is real and it does happen. As I said, I probably would not feel comfortable going and talking to farmers or anyone over the age of probably grade 6 about some safety issues because they would look at me and say, ‘What do you know? Are you a farmer? Did you grow up on a farm?’ So you need to get the people that have experienced it to talk to them.

Mr WALSH — Should farm safety become part of the curriculum of the school system in country schools?

Ms MARCHANT — I think that would be a really good idea, because it would not to be just a one-off session, but a session that would be covered throughout the year. Even when the students looked at statistics and issues around the world they could look at that as one of the issues.

Mr WALSH — Have you talked to any of the schools about having it as a regular session at schools?

Ms MARCHANT — I have never gone into secondary schools.

Mr WALSH — I was talking more primary probably, because you need to start younger than secondary.

Ms MARCHANT — I have done primary school sessions, but just one-offs.

The CHAIR — May the committee get a copy of the results from your survey?

Ms MARCHANT — Yes, if I can get some contact details.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for giving the committee your time and sharing with it what you have been doing. You will get a copy of the transcript and you will be able to correct any matters of fact or grammar but not matters of substance.

Witness withdrew.