CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into cause of fatality and injury on Victorian farms

Ballarat–27 April 2004

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Witnesses
Ms S. O’Neill, chief executive officer (sworn);
Mr M. Stevens, education manager (sworn); and
Dr L. Prosser, manager, research and development (sworn),
WorkSafe KIDS
Ms O’NEILL — My name is Susie O’Neill. My address is 508 Wendouree Parade, Ballarat. I am the chief executive officer of WorkSafe KIDS.

Mr STEVENS — My name is Mathew Stevens of 5 Sangria Court, Mt Clear. I am the education manager of WorkSafe KIDS.

Dr PROSSER — My name is Laurie Prosser of 37 St Chester Avenue, Lake Gardens. I am the manager, research and development of WorkSafe KIDS.

The CHAIR — Thank you for your attendance today. If you would give us a brief presentation, then we will have some questions for you following that.

Ms O’NEILL — KIDS Education is a not-for-profit organisation funded by sponsorship, donations and fundraising activities. It was founded 10 years ago as a governing body to encourage schools to actively engage in safety education programs and to promote affiliate safety organisations in schools. The safety education program is now branded WorkSafe KIDS after receiving ongoing sponsorship from WorkSafe Victoria through the Victorian WorkCover Authority. We have enjoyed a four-year reporting partnership with WorkSafe Victoria.

Every day 5000 children are injured and 200 children are hospitalised in Australia, with accidental injury being the largest single cause of death amongst Australian children. Due to this unacceptable level of injuries and death, WorkSafe KIDS saw the need to broaden safety education programs. As children were becoming more independent at a much earlier age, effective safety education programs needed to target the children directly. The mission of WorkSafe KIDS is to provide quality education programs that result in the reduction of preventable child injuries and death. WorkSafe KIDS delivers 1890 resources to Victorian primary schools four times a year. It works on a one-to-one basis with 400 schools, including 800 students, 400 teachers and parents, to make positive change to school environment and behaviour patterns and to provide new opportunities for students and to upgrade playgrounds.

It is the philosophy of WorkSafe KIDS to provide a breadth of experiences and opportunities aimed at developing children’s cognitive understanding of risk management that leads to the adoption of a whole-of-life safety culture. WorkSafe KIDS is dedicated to childhood injury prevention through education.

Mr STEVENS — There is a copy of the programs that WorkSafe KIDS runs in your folders.

Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the work that Dulcie Long and Peter Birkett — who could not be with us today — have done, from my understanding of the work that farm safety has done over the last six to eight months. Approximately six months ago Dulcie Long contacted me, as she mentioned, in relation to providing some sort of sponsorship to assist the Childless Tractors farm safety program to continue in her region. It was after this meeting that I began receiving a number of calls from farm safety action groups around the state in relation to WorkSafe KIDS and what support we could provide to them. Part of our program contains a farm safety component, and you will find that in your documents.

I became concerned that if farm safety educators were contacting WorkSafe KIDS in relation to farm safety, what programs were being offered by the farm safety governing bodies? In my reading about farm safety education in Australia, I have become aware of the lack of direction that farm safety has in Victoria. To clarify that statement; there are many wonderful farm safety programs being taught by passionate farm safety educators throughout Victoria. However, I feel that farm safety education in Victoria is fragmented and lacks continuity and cohesion.

As a result of our reading and understanding, WorkSafe KIDS would like to coordinate a statewide conference for all stakeholders who are providing farm safety, that may assist in the reduction of farm injuries or at least continue to raise awareness of the dangers inherent with the rural lifestyle. The aim of this conference would be to gather an alliance of ideas and innovations where all attendees were prepared to share their knowledge and resources of farm safety, with the desired result being a cohesive farm safety program that is generic to farm safety yet flexible to be specific to a particular region — that is, the orchard region compared to the dairy region.

As mentioned by Lesley Day in her presentation to this committee, effective programs combine education, environmental changes, engineering solutions and enforcement. They do not always have all three elements but the effective programs are typically characterised by a combination of strategies.
At the conclusion of the farm safety conference, WorkSafe KIDS would like the opportunity to work with FarmSafe Victoria, WorkSafe and the Department of Education and Training and other parties to develop a school-based curriculum for all Victorian primary schools, with the intention of engaging children, parents, staff and the wider community. In designing a farm safety education program we need to take into account the variety of ways children interact on a farm — whether they live on a traditional farm, live on or visit a hobby farm at weekends or visit a mate who happens to live on a farm.

Dr PROSSER — Just to give you a snapshot of the work that we are doing with the international perspective. Our current approach to safety education would appear to be endorsed by the findings of the European Commission which recently passed the Rome Declaration on Mainstreaming Occupational Health and Safety into Education and Training. The commission sought to come up with a strategy for the future that would prepare and sustain people through their life, from childhood to teens to adult working life and into retirement — in other words, a whole-of-life strategy for safety education.

The following findings were sanctioned: projects for young children to make use of imagination and play; projects where children can use their own environment and sources of examples of risks — and parents should be involved in that process. Look at primary schools today compared to 20 or 30 years ago and, for example, climbing apparatus. A lot of parallel bars and monkey bars have been withdrawn because accidents have happened and the solution has been to take them away rather than teaching kids to work safely on the apparatus — in other words to make judgments, which is really critical to the whole education process for young kids.

We have submitted a proposal to the University of Ballarat for an Australian Research Council grant to look at developing risk intelligence in young children. I was brought up on a dairy farm and spent 25 years at Labertouche where we carted 20 000 or 25 000 square hay bales every summer. But from being a young child I was brought up to think about safety. It has been demonstrated by research that young kids can be taught safety at a young age and that is what the UN outcome in Rome says: we have got to get them young and it has got to be a way of life throughout their life.

The Workers Compensation Board of British Columbia (Canada) has introduced a program from kindergarten through to grade 12 as part of its curriculum. We are arguing that safety education should be part of the education department’s curriculum. That is the position we are coming from.

WorkSafe Victoria employed Sweeney Research Melbourne to evaluate what we are doing, and it came out very well. The results showed that of the schools surveyed, nearly 9 out of 10 principals and coordinators from member schools said that the program had built awareness of the issues of being safe in and around the primary school, and they made positive changes with positive results. For example, the school at Graham Street, Port Melbourne — which is one of the oldest primary schools — spent $40 000 as a result. They did a safety inventory and things needed to be changed. They managed to pick up a grant and $40 000 has been spent. The transformation can be compared like day and night.

That is just one example of the program. There was a paper done only this year by Fiona Robbe, who is a landscape architect. She presented the paper at the KidSafe National Playground Conference in March. Part of what she said is quoted on page 3 of our submission. It was a snapshot of the differences between kids today and kids of 20 and 30 years ago. I will quote from it:

There is evidence to suggest that the current generation of children, dubbed the ‘indoor generation’ have fewer first-hand experiences than previous generations. This is the result of an increase in vicarious experiences, such as media and computer games, and a decrease in ‘first-hand’ experiences due to over-protectiveness and risk avoidance.

She believes these practices are:

... bubble wrapping children, depriving them of opportunities for autonomous risk taking due to concerns about stranger danger —

which is fair enough:

... car danger, and injury prevention. The results are increasing levels of obesity, decreased physical fitness levels, eye and back problems and anxiety and depression.

One example we heard only recently was in Moonee Ponds where a child was riding to school, fell off the bike, and so now all bikes are banned from the school.
You can see how we are taking decision making away from children, and that is part of what we would hope to try to somehow get back into the curriculum.

Mr STEVENS — We believe that given an adequate level of support and assistance the immediate problems of ATVs, child drownings, children on tractors, child supervision and mixing recreation with farming activities can be reduced by utilising long and short–term strategies.

Clearly education within the school curriculum does provide an immediate opportunity to address the above issues. When education is combined with environmental changes, engineering solutions and enforcement, positive behavioural change and attitudes towards safety can take place.

As emphasised by Dulcie, the opportunity that exists with farm safety education is not about, ‘This is my piece of information and this is yours and so I will hang on to it’; rather it is about putting it out on the table, letting everybody have a look at it, then working together to reduce the recorded number of injuries and deaths but also the unaccounted for near misses that we do not know exist.

Mr McQUILTEN — You brought up the subject of ATVs. How do you fix the problem of them, the number of deaths happening, because you mentioned adequate support and assistance. What do you mean by that?

Mr STEVENS — It is really by people who have an interest in farm safety education and a background in it. I come from Shepparton so I visit friends on a farm, but I need to go and visit the people living on a farm who are educated in farm safety and say, ‘What do we need to do? We come from an educational perspective, so as an education group, what are some of the things that WorkSafe KIDS in farm safety education need to address in relation to ATVs? We then need to look at the environmental changes and the technology to bring it all together.

It is not just education that will solve it alone, but I believe quite strongly — and WorkSafe KIDS has the motto — that if we can educate them at a young age, then as they begin to grow they will not only keep that knowledge but also share that knowledge with people around them such as their families.

Dr NAPTHINE — I must admit I am now getting confused. We have got this booklet from you — all very professional and wonderful — we go to Gippsland and we have Jill Tucker telling us what good things they are doing with school programs; we have the Hesse health service doing other things with school programs; up in Ouyen we have the farm safety programs, all of which say that theirs is a great program and that theirs is special.

Now we have you. How do we work out who is delivering the best programs? How do we ensure that there is quality control and how do we ensure that all children get exposed to it with a consistent approach and message?

Ms O’NEILL — Originally when WorkSafe KIDS was established nearly 11 years ago that was why we came into practice — because out in the community were some wonderful programs. There were some life saving programs, farm education programs, bike ed programs, but the problem was the schools were being fed little bits of information. They were not educated on the most effective and time efficient way to use all the information; so in some cases they were not using them at all.

We brought together every safety organisation and emergency service group and said, ‘How do we get the message across to schools?’ And we decided that if WorkSafe KIDS could introduce a very broad program on all safety issues we could follow it up by introducing bike ed, swimming programs or whatever the need of that school was, and have good programs that currently exist rather than reinventing them.

I see the same thing happening with farms. All these great people are out there doing bits and pieces. We get phone calls every day saying, ‘Can you send us 200 copies of Kelly Street?’ and we do all these little follow ups, and send the resources out to the organisations.

What we are saying is, ‘Bring everybody together, put on the table all the good things being done out there and bundle it up into one program that can be quite easily adapted to suit the region, and we will provide the resources, so that there is no duplication, no wasting of funds and resources and it can be done by an overall body’ which we already currently do for schools in Victoria.

Not only that, but when Sweeney Research went out to research it they looked at lots of different ways of delivering the program, and all of them rated over 90 per cent.
Dr NAPTHINE — So your answer is that you guys should be the ones who are the overall coordinators, managers and quality controllers and the other people should operate under that umbrella?

Ms O’NEILL — I see our organisation as a support network for all organisations. In the past — and it happened before — there were so many organisations that had ownership of a certain part of the program. What I am saying is let us open up all of the good programs to everybody but we are already funded to provide resources, so why not support the organisations and groups out there delivering them? We do not want to be in 10 different regions at one time delivering programs but we can be the support network for all those programs to deliver them effectively to their regions.

Mr STEVENS — Going back to the point I made earlier about what was happening six months ago, it is through that point in time that I have become aware of the Jill Tuckers of this world. We are going to the Rochester Farm Day, there has been recommendations that we go to the Wimmera, apparently there are 34 farm action groups, and so it goes on. My concern is: is there a support network for those people? Do they know about each other? Are they contacting each other in relation to good programs they are happening? My answer to that at the moment is — no, they are not. There needs to be some way where they come together and put everything on the table.

Ms O’NEILL — Our organisation has been very successful in achieving sponsorship and fundraising activities. Lots of these small community organisations are the doers and they do not have the opportunity to raise the funds that we do. Most of them have applied to us for funding for buses and so forth, and we intend to set up a fund so that we have money reserved to send out to those groups to provide buses to ensure that no-one misses out on that program.

We are already producing the resources so it will not be a large cost to us to increase the volume — as most of the costs are in the small production runs anyway — to produce a lot more and deliver to all the organisations.

Dr NAPTHINE — So Hesse should give their brochure to you and say, ‘Put your expertise over it, put your stamp on it’ and you will then provide the materials back to them for them to continue to run their program?

Ms O’NEILL — In the long term, yes.

Mr STEVENS — I met with Dulcie in relation to this particular book and in relation to funding. I said, ‘We haven’t got the funding, the money to update that’ so with this magazine the Kelly Street magazine, Dulcie sat down with me and I said, ‘If you are going through your program, how can we assist you through what we already produce, to compliment what you have already got? How can I make the Kelly Street magazine complementary to your existing program?’

I am sure and hope that Dulcie would use not only that document but combine it with the Kelly Street magazine, and I am sure you will find that the ‘Can you be seen?’ page has information which is very similar in both because it has come from an expert who works in the field. It just looks more attractive for the child to complete in our one. So it is really a matter of combining the talents of the people existing, to see what we can do.

Ms LONG — (From the floor) We have just received funding through the Geelong Community Foundation to update our book to make it more user–friendly for the kids, more fun for kids to use, so in the very near future the main items in the book, the puzzles and so on that the kids love doing will stay, but we have a caricature being produced to make this fun for the kids to work through, so our book is being updated to use in our program.

The CHAIR — As an ex-primary school teacher, Dulcie, I think a teacher would find the worksheets useful. Also children would not have a lot of difficulty in doing them, so they are well done.

In regard to the production of resources, you say that you should bring everything together so that one body helps to coordinate the types of things that are going out to the different schools and to support the different programs. In what other ways can you support those communities to provide programs on farm safety?

Ms O’NEILL — Can I just say that we run another program? We now work with the University of Ballarat and Victoria University to educate future teachers in our program. We have a number of students who take
our programs into schools throughout the country. So when they are well educated they will also be able to work in the farming and agricultural field as well.

WorkSafe KIDS does not want to take anything away from the communities — we want them to have their own branding and develop their programs — but rather to be there to support them. We have employed Dr Laurie Prosser whose expertise is in research and development. So before we start anything we look at every program that currently exists and evaluate it to find out which ones are most effective. If it is different in different regions, why that is so and how we can adapt it to others. So there is a lot of pre-planning.

It is important to have everyone involved in decision-making, bringing all of the 35 rural groups together and producing material that is of excellent quality that can be used on a statewide basis.

The CHAIR — So do you provide professional development on how to utilise the magazine and the resources — —

Ms O’NEILL — Yes.

The CHAIR — And do you go out into local communities to make it easier for people to learn about it? One of the biggest issues is about distance of travel, and for example, if people have to go from East Gippsland to Ballarat to learn about something, it is highly likely that they will not attend. How do you — —

Ms O’NEILL — We go to the communities. We also have a program through the schools TV via satellite, so the program goes to them. We do not run our programs out of Ballarat; we run them in the regions.

Mr STEVENS — Last year we ran the program through Gippsland — Sale, Moe and Lakes Entrance. We went to Bendigo, Shepparton and we were in Melbourne at one point. Then we went to Hamilton, Warrnambool and Portland. We went into those communities, not only with our safety club — which you can read about — but also with regard to safety in general. We go to aquatic centres and through our program we also look at water safety. We have had the fire brigade, Victoria Police and a whole range of different people coming in.

Ms O’NEILL — We ran one other successful program last year which was called SeeMore’s Challenge where we paired an industry with a primary school and we put challenges in place. That involved health, safe practices and nutrition. It could quite easily work in rural communities as well. That was piloted and is going statewide this year.

Mr STEVENS — It is not about us just taking this and running with it. It is us working in partnership with the people who have the knowledge. It is just an avenue for bringing that knowledge together and laying it on the table.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for giving us your time today and for presenting us with this information; it is very helpful. You will get a copy of the transcript. You may correct any matters of fact or grammar, but not matters of substance.

Witnesses withdrew.