

## Support is at hand for stressed farmers

Alarm bells rang in rural communities a couple of years ago after an apparent cluster of suicides by farmers in the Manawatu.

The families of those who died spoke of the stress of farming, social isolation, strain on mental health services and the stigma surrounding a mental illness such as depression, as playing a part in the loss of their loved ones.

In New Zealand there is no specific research on farmer stress and suicide, but the informal evidence and overseas studies point to farming being a high risk occupation as far as mental health is concerned.

\* A major study of farmer suicide in England and Wales shows high rates. Obviously there are differences between farming practices in the UK and those in New Zealand, the main one being the incidence of BSE or “mad cow” disease. However, the following findings from that study, which included a survey of 500 farmers, may have relevance for New Zealand farmers.

- 80% of farmers who committed suicide were thought to be severely depressed, yet only 33% of these had received treatment for depression;
- 66% had visited doctor in the months prior to their death, complaining of physical symptoms such as poor sleep;
- 33% suffered from chronic illness;
- Among those surveyed, worry about financial matters, especially among owners of small farms, was a major concern. Of those who committed suicide, half had been likely to lose their farm.
- Many participants reported increased stress from the impact of new legislation and regulations and difficulties with the increased amounts of paperwork;
- Weather events beyond their control were concern;
- Changing social patterns, particularly the decline of rural populations and amenities were also an issue;
- Family breakup, often a result of the above problems, was not a direct cause of suicide, but may have been the “last straw” in some cases;
- Ready access to firearms is a likely contributor to the rate of farmer suicide in the UK. Farmers were more likely than males in the general population to have used guns as a means of committing suicide.

British researchers suggested that stress levels in farmers might be reduced by establishing local support groups, help lines and by more general understanding of the signs of depression. Practically, banks needed to be more flexible about loans. The researchers also recommended retraining and rehousing schemes for those who chose to leave farming. Access to firearms was another issue to address.

Here in New Zealand, rural support networks have been established to help prevent more farmer suicides.

Dairy farmer Leslie Mitchell of the Manawatu Combined Rural Support Network says the stigma surrounding mental illness can be a barrier to farmers seeking help.

“We need to be able to talk with one another and not be reluctant to ask for help”, she says.

“Rural GPs also need to be much more aware of mental illness. Combining the right medication, if needed, with support from family, friends and colleagues can help most people.”

\* Hawton, K. et al. Suicide and Stress in Farmers, Stationery Office Books, London, 1998.

Like Minds Taranaki works closely with Federated Farmers Rural Support Trust and with national organisations to increase awareness and understanding about stress, anxiety and depression.

Like Minds Taranaki also play an active role in raising suicide prevention awareness in Taranaki and elsewhere in New Zealand.

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