Farmers’ mental health: the NSW Farmers Blueprint for Mental Health—building critical partnerships and programs to improve the mental health and well-being of people on farms

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Abstract

The Australian National Action Plan for Promotion, Prevention and Early Intervention for Mental Health 2000 proposed that a population health approach addressing risk and protective factors can enhance mental health at the individual, family and community and society levels. Although the farming population was not identified as a priority population per se, research has identified this population to be at high risk of suicide, and of having difficulty in coping with the range of pressures associated with life and work in this industry.

Aim

To describe the establishment of the NSW Farmers Network for Mental Health, and its role in development of the NSW Farmers Blueprint for Mental Health and overseeing implementation of key interagency programs to achieve its aim.

The Network

In May 2005, at the peak of the drought in NSW, the NSW Farmers Association (NSWFA) convened the Drought Summit in Parkes NSW, following which a number of agencies made contact with proposals for how assistance could be provided to address the welfare, depression and other mental health needs of farmers in NSW. The Australian Centre for Agricultural Health and Safety and the Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health worked together with NSWFA to identify key agencies who were invited to participate in a longer term collaborative program aimed at improving the mental health and well-being of the people on farms. Participating agencies include welfare agencies, crisis line providers, academics, national and state government services, mental health services, farming organisations and farm women.

The Blueprint

The Blueprint (www.aghealth.org.au/blueprint) describes itself as “a simplified summary of key issues that need to be addressed, and the major actions that we can be confident will be effective in achieving our purpose”. It identifies ‘steps’ along ‘pathways to breakdown’ from the range of known mental health and suicide risk factors that are relevant to the NSW farming population, and 23 areas of current and potential action that would contribute to improving mental health, as key steps along ‘pathways to health’. For each of the areas of action there is described the rationale and basis for action, and the lead agency or individual who has accepted responsibility for co-ordinating and reporting further activity to the Network.

Implications for policy, delivery or practice

The NSW Farmers Blueprint and the activities being implemented by the NSW Farmers Mental Health Network partners represent a model or example of implementing a mental health strategy in an identified at-risk Australian population. That population is scattered widely across the state, and the growing social isolation of this group is both a mental health risk factor as well as a major challenge to planning and implementing an effective health program. The program will be enhanced with the input of the evaluation team to assist each activity to establish more measurable objectives.
Presenter

Lyn Fragar is the Director of the Australian Centre for Agricultural Health and Safety, a research centre of the University of Sydney. The Centre is based in Moree in north-west New South Wales. Under Lyn’s direction, the Australian Centre for Agricultural Health and Safety undertakes a wide-ranging program of research aimed at providing practical and effective solutions to the health and safety problems faced by those in agriculture. Lyn is a founding member and Secretary of Farmsafe Australia, is Deputy Chair of the Board of the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority, and the Chair of the Hunter New England Area Health Advisory Council.