

# Program improves farmer health

**A**N INNOVATIVE program has improved the health of more than 200 dairy farm families throughout Victoria in the past three years. National Centre for Farmer Health director Sue Brumby told the Victorian dairy conference at Warrnambool in March that the Sustainable Dairy Farm Families program “really made a difference to farmers’ lives”.

Ensuring the health of farmers was essential because if a farmer was ill it had a quadruple effect, she said. When a farmer was ill it affected:

- the farmer;
- the farm family;
- the farm business – through loss of labour and increased occupational health and safety requirements; and
- the community – because farmers were often heavily involved in local committees and organisations.

The program was vital because the health of many people in rural Victoria was worse than that of their metropolitan counterparts. The life expectancy of a male in the country was six years less than a male in the city, she said. The incidence of diabetes and other chronic illnesses was also higher.

Ms Brumby said her organisation’s research showed that farmers had less access to fresh food than their city counterparts.

There was also a low level of knowledge in the health sectors about specific issues relating to farmer health. For example, leptospirosis was often undiagnosed in dairy-farmers because health professionals were unaware of the disease.

Ms Brumby said the program aimed to train people to take an active role in improving their health. “Health is a lifelong process,” she said. “It is never too late to start but you must start.”

Each family takes part in the program for three years. In the first year participants



**Chairman of WestVic Dairy Laurie Hickey takes part in the health check undertaken by Western District Health Services community nurse Adam Taylor.**

attend a two-day workshop. A series of health checks are taken, including for blood pressure, weight, height, waist measurement, respiratory function and blood tests for blood sugar and cholesterol. Where necessary, participants are referred to a health professional for ongoing monitoring or treatment of problem areas.

Gender-specific sessions are held about women’s and men’s health. Participants are given nutritional information and taught how to read food labels. They are also taught stress management techniques including meditation.

At the end of the workshop, participants write an action plan for themselves and the farm business.

In the second year, the health checks are repeated and compared with previous results. The gender-specific sessions are repeated with men learning about women’s health issues and women learning about men’s health issues. The action plans are redeveloped.

In the third year, the health checks are repeated and re-checked. Participants are also taught how to include health as part of their business decision-making.

Ms Brumby said 211 dairy farm families

in Victoria took part in the initial program run between 2005 and 2008. The initial test results had shown that:

- 70% of participants had a high body mass index, indicating they were overweight or obese – a figure that was higher than for other farm groups and well above the state average;
- 55% of men had a waist measurement above 102 centimetres and 38% of women had a waist measurement above 88cm, which was an indicator of high risk for developing type-two diabetes;
- 70% of men and 60% of women were referred to a doctor for further checks;
- smoking rates were lower than the state average with only 8.3% of participants smoking;
- alcohol consumption was higher than the state average;
- 60% did not wear a bike helmet at any time; and
- some people were suffering serious illnesses that had not been previously diagnosed.

Ms Brumby said the program had led to changes in many of the participants’ lives. More had started using protective equipment and many had implemented plans to manage stress. People had taken more holidays, spent more time with their families and adopted different farm systems. The program had prompted farmers to think differently about the farm set-up and what it meant to their lives.

“Dairyfarmers are generally good observers of behaviour so they were able to change their own behaviour,” she said.

The Department of Primary Industries Victoria has just announced funding for a further 500 farmers to take part in Sustainable Farm Families programs across all farming sectors.

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