

Suicide and its prevention for ageing farmers



FINAL REPORT

A/Professor Lia Bryant

Dr Bridget Garnham

Centre for Social Change
University of South Australia

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Centre for Social Change

RESEARCH TEAM

A/Professor Lia Bryant

Director: Centre for Social Change, School of Psychology, Social Work and Social Policy, University of South Australia.

Dr Bridget Garnham

Research Associate: Centre for Social Change, School of Psychology, Social Work and Social Policy, University of South Australia.

Ms Lynne James

Principal Project Officer Suicide Prevention, Office of the Chief Psychiatrist, SA Health.

Ms Bronwyn Ryan

Community Engagement Project Officer, Country Health SA- Mental Health Services

Ms Deb Wildgoose

Principal Project Officer, Strategic Partnerships Unit, Department for Health and Ageing.

Ms Jacki Evans

Project Officer, Strategic Partnerships Unit, Department for Health and Ageing.

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BACKGROUND

Deaths by suicide for farming men and women have a huge impact on the family and rural and agricultural communities in which they occur. The disproportionately high rate of farmer suicide has not declined in Australia even though as a community we have known about this problem for many years (Guiney, 2012; Judd et al., 2006; Page & Fragar, 2002). News of farmer suicides has reached media forums and reports, there has been a senate enquiry into suicide and there have been studies and intervention programs focusing on rural suicide. Yet the number of farmer suicides is not reducing.

Australian farmers are ageing, in terms of both individual ageing and population ageing. The mean age of farmers in Australia is 58 years and farmers are more likely to continue working well beyond the age at which most other workers retire (Gullifer & Thompson, 2006; Polain, Berry, & Hoskin, 2011). In 2011, almost a quarter (23 per cent) of farmers were aged 65 years or over, compared with just 3 per cent of people in other occupations (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012). Indeed, agriculture has the oldest workforce in Australia (Rogers, Barr, O'callaghan, Brumby, & Warburton, 2013). Older male farmers are potentially the group most at-risk of suicide. This is difficult to ascertain however, given that disparate statistics, research and literatures on suicide present only a fragmented picture, in relation to intersections between age, gender and occupation. The rural studies literature reveals that farmers are disproportionately at risk of suicide (Guiney, 2012; Judd et al., 2006; Page & Fragar, 2002), the literature on older people and suicide reveals that this age group has the highest suicide rate (Conwell, 2001; Fung & Chan, 2011; Haag Granello & Granello, 2007; Harwood & Jacoby, 2000; Manthorpe & Iliffe, 2011; O'Connell, Chin, Cunningham, & Lawlor, 2004) and the literature on gender and suicide reveals that in general the rate of suicide for men greatly exceeds that of women (Canetto & Cleary, 2012; Canetto & Lester, 1998; Coleman, Kaplan, & Casey, 2011; Ní Laoire, 2001; Rutz & Rihmer, 2007; Synnott, 2009). Reading across these literatures suggests that being male, older and a farmer constitute an amalgamation of high risk for suicide (Garnham & Bryant, 2014).

There have been ongoing concerns about the occupational stressors of farming and their impact on wellbeing (e.g. Berry, Hogan, Owen, Rickwood, & Fragar, 2011; Centre for Rural

Mental Health, 2005; Fraser et al., 2005). In Australia drought is considered a key determinant of poor mental health and a defining feature of explanations for increases in farmer suicides (e.g. Alston, 2012; Alston & Kent, 2008; Berry et al., 2011; Fragar, Kelly, Peters, Henderson, & Tonna, 2008; Guiney, 2012; Hanna, Bell, King, & Woodruff, 2011; Judd et al., 2006). In the international literature, farmer stress, mental illness and suicides are contextualised by agricultural disasters affecting production and economic viability such as 'bad' weather and disease (e.g. Firth, Williams, Herbison, & McGee, 2007; Gregoire, 2002; Mort, Convery, Baxter, & Bailey, 2005; Peck, Grant, McArthur, & Godden, 2002) and by agricultural restructure and transition to global, neoliberal economies (Madare, 2012; Mitra & Shroff, 2007; Mohanakumar & Sharma, 2006; Münster, 2012). These ideas support a gendered cultural 'script' (Bryant & Garnham, 2015; Canetto & Lester, 1998) in which male farmers faced with overwhelming financial debt and the failure of the farming enterprise suicide (e.g. Hanigan, Butler, Kokic, & Hutchinson, 2012; Neales, 2014; Rees, 2007; Turvey, Stromquist, Kelly, Zwerling, & Merchant, 2002).

In terms of responding to farmer distress and suicide, a psychosocial approach dominates understandings in which suicide is conceptualised as an event with antecedents, variables correlated with risk and methods of self-harm (Guiney, 2012; Page and Fragar, 2002). As such there has been a corresponding emphasis on identifying symptoms of stress and depression, encouraging help-seeking behaviour and alleviating the social conditions that contribute to poor mental health such as lack of service provision in rural areas, social isolation and social change (Alston, 2007; Berry et al., 2011; Gregoire, 2002; Guiney, 2012; Judd et al., 2006; Meyer & Lobao, 2003; Monk, 2000; Staniford, Dollard, & Guerin, 2009). The psychosocial approach tends to locate the problem of suicide with the individual and consequently interventions that aim to prevent suicide also tend to focus on the individual. Psychosocial understandings of the 'risk factors' contributing to the phenomenon of farmer suicide allows us to build a picture of the problem. However, that picture is fragmented, reductive and circumscribed. As Price and Evans (2005: 45) argue, the psychosocial approach tends 'to focus on the dramatic outcomes of processes of stress in the form of suicide rather than the dynamics of social processes themselves which form the underlying causes of stress'. In-depth inquiry into the 'underlying causes' of stress and distress are therefore needed to cast insight into everyday, locally contextualized experiences that

potentially render life unlivable. This approach enables distress to be understood as 'bound up with the actualities of a farming way of life' (Price & Evans, 2009: 4). For instance, recent interdisciplinary scholarship has critically explored some of the complex ways in which farmer distress is enmeshed with gendered identities within patriarchal family farming (Price and Evans, 2005, 2009), the political economy and delimited agency (Bryant & Garnham, 2013), cultures of farming masculinity in relation to pride and shame (Bryant & Garnham, 2015; Ramirez-Ferrero, 2005) and unethical conduct within the moral economy of agribusiness (Bryant & Garnham, 2014). This work is significant because it opens up new frameworks from which to generate social and political responses to alleviate distress and prevent suicide.

The psychosocial approach to farmer suicide and its prevention does not entirely neglect the social contexts and conditions for suicide. However, through the centrality of the individual, 'the social' is generally engaged in terms of an individual's access to and connection to services and supports for mental health and wellbeing. This approach is limited in its conception of 'the social' and excludes possibilities for greater complexity of understanding the uniquely rural social contexts and conditions that can generate distress for farmers and provide conditions of possibility for suicide. In particular, this dominant framing of 'social' neglects the social embeddedness of individuals within their local community. As rural studies scholars have shown, rural communities provide an important site for understanding the experiences, identities and local culture of rural people including farmers (e.g. Mayerfield Bell, 2004; Ramirez-Ferrero, 2005). Understanding farming identities and their connection to emotional experience, moral worth and community inclusion or exclusion provides vital dimensions to knowledge of farmer distress and suicide (Bryant & Garnham, 2015; Ramirez-Ferrero, 2005). This is particularly since recent conceptualisations of farmer suicide have suggested that suicide occurs as a consequence of an 'undoing' of a morally valued identity (Bryant & Garnham, 2015; Hogan, Scarr, Lockie, Chant, & Alston, 2012).

The combination of demographic 'risk factors' associated with the suicides of older male farmers might provide an entry point for exploring questions relating to how intersections between masculinities, age and farming identity might be implicated in suicide. Whilst a body of research has examined ways in which masculinity and farmer suicide intersect,

these studies have largely neglected questions of age and ageing except to suggest that older male farmers may be more at risk because their masculinity is closely tied to their history and heritage in farming and their role as breadwinner (Alston, 2007, 2011; King, Land, MaDougall, & Greenhill, 2009). A recent study (Polain et al., 2011) on the mental health of older farmers in the context of drought revealed experiences of perceived loss of economic and social status and self-esteem, a sense of failure, beliefs that governments and urban communities did not trust them as custodians of the land and stigma surrounding mental health and a general lack of support through service provision. The study also described older farmer's 'sense of loss relating to being left behind in the modern world because they could not keep up-to-date with new technology (e.g., internet banking)' (Polain *et al.* 2011, p. 241). It did not however, critically examine social or cultural questions relating to age group or ageing. Nor did it seek to contextualize the individual within the family or community. The point of departure for this study, from other research to date, is to explore issues emerging from the population ageing of farmers and develop a rurally contextualised understanding of distress and suicide prevention for ageing farmers.

RESEARCH PROJECT

Aim & objectives

To identify needs and local strategies for rural suicide prevention for older farmers through consultation with key community based stakeholders.

Key objectives related to this aim include identifying:

1. What suicide prevention strategies for older farmers are being implemented in rural South Australia;
2. Current areas of strength in terms of preventing suicide of older farmers;
3. The needs of older farmers for suicide prevention and conditions underpinning distress for this population (e.g. succession planning, retirement, transition off the farm);
4. Strategies that could be implemented to enhance suicide prevention for older farmers.

Methods

The study employed a qualitative design utilizing purposive sampling (Patton, 2002) to select participants, focus groups and telephone interviews (Rice & Ezzy, 1999) to collect data and thematic analysis to produce the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Potential community based stakeholders were identified through online searches and in consultation with the Department for Health and Ageing. Farmers were excluded from the sample due to the focus and restricted scope of the project and ethical concerns about the sensitive nature of the research and potential to cause distress. A letter of invitation to participate in the research was disseminated by e-mail directly to identified stakeholders. Snowball sampling (Patton, 2002) was then used to further build the sample by asking participants to forward the letter of invitation to people in their network who would have information rich perspectives to contribute to the aims of the study. Participants located in proximity to the Adelaide metropolitan area were invited to attend one of two scheduled focus groups (n = 5 & 6) held at the University campus. Participants located in rural South Australia were interviewed by telephone (n = 6). The focus groups lasted 1.5 – 2 hours whilst the telephone interviews varied between 30 – 45 mins. The project operated within the boundaries of the University of South Australia and Department for Health and Ageing Human Research Ethics Policies which included voluntary participation and assurance to participants that in reporting the findings, no identifying data would be used.

The sample comprised 8 men and 9 women (n = 17) representing the following occupations:

- Rural counsellor
- Rural financial counsellor
- Rural mental health service
- Stock agent
- Rural suicide prevention network coordinator
- Agribusiness banking
- Agricultural occupational health and safety
- Suicide bereavement service

Focus group and telephone interview questions:

1. What is your position / role in the community?
2. How does this position bring you into contact with issues relating to suicide and its prevention for older farmers?

3. What do you think are the conditions and circumstances that are increasing distress and risk of suicide for older farmers?
4. What do you think are the unmet needs or service gaps for older farmers?
5. Do older farmers or their family members come to you about issues and stressors associated with succession planning/retirement/transition off the farm? What are the issues as you understand them? How are these impacting on mental health / increasing distress?
6. Do you know of any suicide prevention strategies that have been implemented in your area that target older farmers? What are these? Do they seem to be having an impact?
7. What community based strategies could be implemented to enhance the effectiveness of suicide prevention efforts for older farmers?
8. How might social services / government work with local rural communities in suicide prevention efforts for older farmers?

The focus groups were audio-recorded and two of the research team members independently recorded notes. The data from the telephone interviews was recorded as notes by the interviewer. The entire data set was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to organise, synthesize and interpret the findings. These processes produced three overarching themes:

- 1. Ageing and farming trajectories impacting on farmer wellbeing**
- 2. Community: A problem and a solution for farmer wellbeing**
- 3. Service and supports for farmer wellbeing**

FINDINGS

1. Ageing and farming trajectories impacting on farmer wellbeing

The concept of 'older' in relation to farmers was questioned during the interviews and focus groups. Participants asked what we meant by 'older' farmers and we asked participants what they thought would qualify as an 'older' farmer. Some participants suggested that the qualification was connected to the title of 'farmer' rather than chronological age per se and if you could qualify as a farmer then you were necessarily 'older'. This is due to the status of 'farmer' being connected to gendered farm succession to ownership of the farming

enterprise. The population ageing of farmers is linked to increasing longevity of occupation and a corresponding increase in the age at which the status of 'farmer' is attained as well as declining rates of younger farmers in agriculture (Rogers et al., 2013).

In terms of chronological age and life stage, participants did not consider farmers in their 70s and over as being at an increased risk for distress and suicide. Rather, from their experience and knowledge in rural communities, participants considered those most at risk to be younger men in their 20s and middle-aged men in their 40s and 50s. In terms of younger men, participants suggested that suicide for this age group is underestimated and largely a hidden phenomenon because single occupant road accidents are not classified as suicide. Participants narrated a 'script' where a twenty-something young man becomes intoxicated at the tavern, starts driving home alone thinking 'nobody cares', 'I'm worthless' and 'everyone would be better off if I was gone' and steers his car into a collision course with a roadside tree. This script was also extended to suggest that 'country cops' often 'turn a blind eye' to any suggestion of suicidal intent so that farming families would receive insurance payouts from superannuation accounts. Of course, the veracity of these accounts of 'rural lore' cannot be ascertained but form part of a community understanding of rural suicide.

Farmers in their mid-40s and 50s were identified by the majority of participants as being the highest risk age category for suicide. This was connected to the context of 'late' succession into the role of 'The Farmer' with financial and managerial control of the farming enterprise. In general, the farming industry does not follow traditional retirement timeframes and processes (Riley, 2012). Rather, farmers can remain working on farms into an advanced age (Gullifer & Thompson, 2006). This can mean that their children (usually sons) who are waiting to take over the farm are in their 50-60s, and grandchildren in their 30-40s. Participants suggested that these farmers have waited and prepared for this role their entire career but perceive a limited time frame to accomplish their own goals and ambitions for the farm before the pressure of expectation for succession begins to mount from the next generation. In addition, with an expectation of succession at some point, farmers son's, participants told us, have often worked on the farm all their lives, but have only drawn living expenses and so have not amassed a great deal of capital wealth. This limited capital base delimits possibilities for purchasing a farm property to take up farm

management prior to their father's retirement, which, some participants suggested, can lead to a 'mid-life crisis' when they consider what they could have accomplished in a non-agricultural occupation such as a trade or mining. In this context and upon succession, middle aged farmers were thought to be more prone to higher risk taking and pressure to take up opportunities when they present, such as purchasing land, owing to a 'it's now or never' attitude. These factors, participants suggested, were leading to 'huge debt' and poorly considered and risky farming strategies with impacts on economic viability and psychological wellbeing. Fear of failure and being the one to 'lose the family farm' were thought to compound the psychological pressure.

According to participants with a financial role in agribusiness, succession planning is underdeveloped in the farming industry. Succession in family farming is an emotionally and legally complex process with economic, lifestyle, practical, human capital, historical and cultural dimensions that play out across generations (Gill, 2013). Without any discussion or formal agreement of when and how succession will be occasioned, families are largely uncertain about their future and the future management of the farm. This can cause frustration, points of stress and intergenerational family conflict that impact on mental health. Participants expressed the view that very often communication between members on family farms is poor and so son's do not convey their expectations for succession to 'dad' who then apparently remains oblivious to the issue and the impact it is having on his son and his family. That 'dad' won't or can't handover the farm was considered a central problem, by some participants. Participants described scenarios where 'dad' cannot afford to bring his son/s into the farming enterprise and is unable to retire or handover the farm for financial reasons. Another common scenario described was that of the older farmer who does not want to retire owing to his love of farming and no interest in doing anything else. Complex emotional and psychological dimensions connected to retirement including perceived loss of a valued identity and role, relinquishing ownership and control of a deeply prized property and transition to an off-farm residence were also identified as impacting on succession (see also Riley, 2012; Rogers et al., 2013).

2. Community: A problem and a solution for farmer wellbeing

The social dimension of community was identified by participants as a problem and as a potential source of support for farmer wellbeing. Indeed, many participants explicitly understood the problem of farmer distress and suicide as bound up with the social conditions and possibilities for inclusion/exclusion within their local community. Whilst participants pointed to traditional forms of social connection in rural communities such as the tavern, sporting clubs, mothers' groups, men's sheds and church as providing frameworks for social inclusion and connectedness they were also aware that these forms equally operate to exclude some members from participation in 'community'. As one participant expressed the point, 'Sport is often a big thing. If you're not a sporting person you're stuffed. Drinking also. If you're not a drinker, you feel like a misfit – people think you are a recovering alcoholic'. Being socially isolated was identified by participants as a threat to wellbeing and as increasing risk for suicide. This was seen to be a particular issue for farmers whose everyday social interaction is limited through co-location of home and work, rural geography, the technological revolution in agribusiness and the temporal conditions and requirements of the occupation. This was a particularly gendered understanding pertaining solely to male farmers and was contrasted by participants with an understanding of the everyday experience of social connection for rural women beyond the farm through shopping in town, running a household and socialisation with friends and neighbours (see also Riley, 2012). Participants also pointed to the impact of social conditions on community wellbeing including economic hardship, unavailability of taxis, demise of sporting clubs, school closures and limited facilities. One participant narrated the 'struggle' of everyday living were 'everything is hard work' due to long distances, limited infrastructure for technology including internet and mobile phone services, time and energy spent volunteering and the challenge of trying to keep local business and schools operating. This participant regarded locally held 'family days' where everyone comes together with 'kids all around' as key to community wellbeing.

In terms of responding to farmer distress and preventing suicide, participants regarded 'community' as fundamental to identifying people at risk, social agency and change and a therapeutic resource. Moreover, by uniting toward a common goal, community action would increase social cohesion and support community wellbeing. A central theme argued

by participants is that communities need information, resources and training to respond to distress and given that local people are best placed to pick up changes in friends, family, colleagues and neighbours this would enable much earlier intervention. Suggestions put forward by participants included:

- Community fund and awareness raising events oriented towards de-stigmatizing psychological distress and community action to support wellbeing;
- 'Train the trainer' / education to upskill local people to respond to distress in not only health occupations but in businesses connected to agriculture including stock agencies, banking and financial services;
- Information cards distributed to local businesses in and outside of agribusiness outlining pathways /sources of support;
- A mechanism to enable rural communities to share knowledge, resources and strategies for responding to distress and preventing suicide;
- Greater community engagement in national and state government funded mental health and suicide prevention strategies utilizing existing social forms such as field days and the Country Fire Service (CFS).

Participants suggested that these types of localised, community embedded strategies would have a number of benefits including greater sustainability, trustworthiness, accessibility and relevance.

3. Service and supports for farmer wellbeing

During the focus groups participants spoke about issues that impact on rural community wellbeing as a result of financial compensation and support issued in response to environmental disasters caused by drought, fire, pests or disease. In particular, participants argued for the need to disrupt the dominant 'drought ideology' that shapes financial support for farmers. The problem they identified is that funding and support for farmers increases and decreases alongside drought conditions such that 'drought' becomes the issue to be managed. This means that when drought is declared 'over', relief funding and support are withdrawn even though farmers in some regions remain drought affected, others are subject to alternative environmental issues such as disease and the

consequences of drought on the economic viability of affected farms and interpersonal relations of highly stressed farmers continue beyond the conclusion of drought weather conditions. Participants also pointed to industry based issues of subjective and differential assessment in subsidies and following agricultural disasters such as the determination of 'smoke taint' following the January 2015 Sampson Flat bush fires. Perceptions of unfair and unethical treatment are an underlying cause of distress for some farmers who consider that 'they haven't done anything wrong but are being punished'. For instance, participants drew on a recent example where a hail storm had caused storm damage and flooding. They talked about the incongruity of one farmer receiving financial compensation for hail damage to crops while his next door neighbour was affected by flooding and was not eligible for assistance. Issues of this nature have the potential to undermine social cohesion through animosity between neighbouring farmers and negative community 'pub talk'.

The interview and focus group discussions also revealed that stock agents, rural financial counsellors and those working in agri-finance and banking were at the 'frontline' of engagement with farmers who may be distressed or suicidal. Those working in these areas talked about the unmet need in the industry for increased awareness of mental illness and training in psycho-social counselling, identifying and responding to distress and suicide prevention. One participant pointed out the importance of understanding the impact of mental illness on cognition saying, 'most people don't understand the change in thinking with depression. People can't solve a simple problem – let alone complex financial matters. They struggle with basic life choices'. However, participants were emphatic that agribusiness agents should not and could not be expected to provide therapeutic support but rather be equipped with the knowledge and skills to provide immediate emotional support and information about available resources and services (see also Doxey & McNamara, 2015).

Other participants related their experience of working with farmers without the knowledge or skills of how to develop a financial plan and in particular, one that complies with the reporting requirements of their financial institution. The complex financial reporting and advancing technological requirements to satisfy the expectations of financial institutions are recognizable occupational stressors for farmers and particularly older farmers. In addition, the norms and expectations for technological engagement in business are urban-

based and do not necessarily translate easily into rural places where IT infrastructure is underdeveloped. One interview participant related her experience of waiting for 40 minutes for a webpage to load showing heavy vehicle haulage routes and the necessity of using the internet only early in the morning before access became too problematic.

Participants suggested that the current State Government strategy for rural mental health focuses on directing funding into largely 'high end' clinical services delivered by professionals in psychology, psychiatry and mental health nursing. This strategy, they advised, had contributed to a 'gap' in terms of rural counselling services, unmet need in rural communities and an increasing level of acute mental illness in the system. A number of participants pointed to the success of rural counsellors as part of the drought relief package and lamented the termination of those positions. The importance of employing local people in these roles was also discussed in terms of availability, trustworthiness and knowledge of local contexts and conditions shaping farmers experiences of distress.

Participants also described the issues connected to short term funding cycles for programs and positions resulting in inconsistency and unsustainability of service, high turn-over of staff and wasted time and resources. Many called for longer funding cycles and emphasized the importance of continuity of employment to attract and retain the right people and provide the time it takes to build relationships and trust in a community. Some participants were critically reflexive about ideas about 'mental illness' and 'pathology' that are connected with 'high end' services. These they noted, are deeply stigmatizing and may not be relevant to farmers' experiences of distress. Participants with close contact to farmers were able to identify the local circumstances, social conditions and contexts that underpin distress for farmers whereas participants working in suicide prevention and mental health services spoke only of 'depression' and 'anxiety' affecting farmers in connection with economic stress and family issues like divorce. The difficulties faced by farmers in terms of accessing 'mainstream' mental health services in their local area was also discussed by participants as a barrier to engagement and effective service provision. Whilst some participants drew on traditional ideas about 'stoic' masculine identity preventing help-seeking, others troubled this idea and posed alternative explanations. These participants described issues confronting rural communities in terms of accessing the complex,

fragmented, unresponsive and continually transforming health and mental health systems that make it 'too hard' for farmers.

Participants with insight into suicide prevention strategies suggested that the focus has largely been toward the 'pointy end' of prevention rather than early intervention. They described programs that aim to prevent an individual engaging in suicidal behaviour and suggested that much more could be done before individuals reach this level of ideation and commitment. Participants also suggested that rural suicide rates would not decline until the underlying causes of suicide are addressed. Some suggested that early intervention would require initiatives that develop mental wellness and community connectedness through social activities that target farming families. A number of local community developed and delivered suicide prevention strategies were also identified and discussed including the 'ski for life' initiative and CORES (Community Response to Eliminating Suicide). However, it was clear that these initiatives are unevenly distributed across regions of the State, are localised in scope and impact and are largely dependent on the resources, skills and motivation of volunteers which vary according to locality.

CONCLUSION

This report suggests that responses to rural suicide have narrowly focused on suicide behaviour and mental illness with intervention policies and programs increasing or decreasing alongside 'drought' conditions. Poor mental health requires treatment and interventions should aim to prevent farmers from suicidal behaviour. However, this research suggests that early preventative interventions responsive to community needs are also required before acute mental illness develops.

The population ageing and increasing career longevity of farmers are creating intergenerational issues connected to expectations for succession and retirement. According to participants in this research, 'late succession' for farmers in their 40s and 50s is part of the context of increased distress and the possibility of suicide for this age cohort. The narratives offered by participants situated 'late succession' within complex overlapping dimensions relating to the economic management of the farm, power and control, 'farmer' status, residential transition and cultures of farming identity and occupation that delimit

pathways to retirement. Counselling services that assist farming families to navigate this complex terrain, mediate family member's expectations and negotiate terms would reduce pressure and distress connected to issues of retirement and succession.

The research also suggests that farmer distress and suicide are connected to the social conditions of living within rural communities. Interventions that target these social conditions and occur within the local community, driven and supported by local people and those who work in rural Australia would empower rural communities to engage, respond and provide support to farmers during times of distress and reduce the incidence of mental illness and suicide.

Disrupting the dominant 'drought ideology' connected to farmer distress and suicide is central to implementing sustainable and effective services and supports for agricultural communities. There are complex social, cultural and ethical dimensions underpinning farmer distress and suicide that are negated and neglected by the mental health system and suicide prevention frameworks. A better understanding of farmer needs, the local contexts and conditions underpinning distress and suicide and the ways in which local community stakeholders can be empowered to respond to farmer distress are urgently needed to reduce the incidence of suicide in rural communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. *Counselling and financial services that support farming families navigate issues connected to succession and retirement.*

Population ageing and non-traditional retirement trajectories for farmers are creating intergenerational issues around expectations for succession to ownership and control of the family farm. Participants suggested that these issues are not being discussed or dealt with in many family farms and constitute an industry-wide problem connected to economics but also complex family dynamics and relationships.

Support early intervention via counselling services to initiate financial planning and communication about family expectations for succession and post-retirement involvement and assist farming families to manage age-related transition.

2. *Early intervention to reduce distress and prevent suicide*

The current approach and frameworks for suicide prevention in Australia are focused on acute suicide behavior prevention rather than early intervention – as one participant in our research put it *'we are trying to catch people as they jump from the cliff rather than heading them off before they get to the cliff face'*. Acute suicide prevention services and resources are needed for those who are at the point of considering and planning a suicidal act but we also need early intervention approaches that help prevent people from reaching that point.

Support early intervention by empowering rural communities to respond to distress, reduce loneliness and change the way farmers, distress and suicide are talked about in local communities.

3. *Prevention strategies informed by agricultural and social dimensions of farmer distress*

The way in which suicide and its prevention are understood are largely shaped by mental illness and disorder – and so treating mental illness has been a central pillar in suicide prevention strategies. We agree that mental illness requires treatment. However, our research demonstrates that farmer distress and suicide have particular agricultural and social dimensions that are not recognized or addressed through mental health approaches. Participants in rural communities emphasized the need to develop social responses to community wellbeing that are a good 'fit' for farming families.

An approach to suicide prevention embedded in local community provides considerable advantages in terms of: 1) Understanding farmer's needs; 2) Obtaining local knowledge of the reasons for distress; 3) Established relationships of trust and respect in rural communities; 4) Being able to leverage scarce resources and infrastructure to create sustainable strategies; 5) Providing immediate local response to farmers experiencing distress; and, 6) Empowerment through community-led awareness and change.

Work in partnership with rural communities to ensure that local knowledge of the contexts for farmer distress and culturally appropriate response are embedded in strategies tailored to need through key local stakeholders.

4. *Scaling up and extending community-led innovation and initiatives*

There are a multitude of rural community driven strategies for raising awareness, generating funding, responding to distress and preventing farmer suicide. However, these initiatives are localized, unevenly distributed and under-resourced.

Generate a State wide evidence-base that consolidates knowledge of local suicide prevention initiatives and enables sharing of ideas, resources and supports to facilitate the spread and effectiveness of community-led initiatives into rural communities with

unmet need.

5. *Mental health training and support for those employed in agribusiness such as stock agents, rural financial counsellors and agribusiness bankers.*

This research produced evidence of substantial unmet need in agribusiness industries for mental health training and support. Men and women in occupations such as stock agent, rural financial counsellor and agribusiness banker are at the 'coal face' of engagement with farmers in the community and often on the farm property. This everyday proximity with farmers positions these occupations at the frontline of early identification of distress or changes to mental health in farming families, as a point of contact for suicide prevention and potentially at risk of burnout and occupational stress. Participants suggested that non-clinical training is needed to enable people in these occupations to be able to respond appropriately to farmers in distress, provide pathways to therapeutic or clinical services and supports and identify and manage their own self-care needs.

Develop tailored education, resources and supports for agribusiness that provide non-clinical information and practical guidance on responding to distress, self-care and suicide prevention.

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