

Sowing the seeds of farmer health

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In theory, it should be one of the healthiest occupations but farmers
face myraid health problems, writes JOANNA ROBERTS.
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rate than other occupational groups.”

The statistics are sobering: in 2010, 25 of the 47 workplace fatalities occurred on farms, even though just 4.5% of the workforce is employed in agriculture. At the National Ploughing Championships in September, Minister for Agriculture Simon Coveney pointed out that 18 people had so far lost their lives on farms in 2011, a figure he called “unacceptably high.” The majority of fatal accidents are caused by tractors and machinery, with other deaths due to livestock, falls and drowning.

Approximately 1,800 people also suffer serious injuries on farms each year, many of which are preventable. To encourage farmers to adopt good health and safety practices, the HSA have published an Agriculture Code of Practice, which can be downloaded from their website. The IFA are currently running a *Think Safety, Farm Safely* campaign to combat the high level of accidents.

Even discounting accidental injury, farming can place a strain on health. More than half of farmers report musculoskeletal problems and farmers are twice as likely to suffer from back pain as the general population. Other issues can include skin cancer, Lyme disease and respiratory problems – risks inherent in a life spent working outside with animals and chemicals.

McNamara says age can contribute to risk of injury on farms, as many elderly farmers continue to work into old age to secure an income. “It’s a huge problem in Irish agriculture that people don’t retire,” says McNamara. “I would think it’s evident – people get more fragile as they get older and more prone to injury.”

One person who knows all too well the toll that farming can place on the body is Brendan (not his real name), a 53 year old farmer from Kilkenny whose knee joints were so damaged that he’s recently had two knee replacements.

“Over the years on a farm you’re receiving injuries the whole time,”

he says. “You’re falling off things, putting strain on yourself, you’re out in the wet, you’re standing all day. I was suffering for years from various injuries but you strap it up and keep going because you can’t afford to take time out.”

Because he was relatively young, the doctors were initially reluctant to perform a knee replacement but eventually did so. “It’s been a big success”, Brendan says. “I take care of it though; I don’t jump down off the tractor or jump down from gates. I have to be careful.”

On a farm, which requires a huge level of physical input, any illness or loss of mobility can be devastating. Since his operations, Brendan has taken on help for the farm and started a small IT business to create an alternative source of income. “I don’t want to sell the cows because it’s taken too long to build up the herd – since I was a child. I don’t want to get rid of what’s been in the family for generations. But I want to have something to do when my health gets bad.”

Mary O’Connor, a chartered physiotherapist in Naas who treats many farmers, says Brendan’s story is familiar. “The most common injury we see is back problems, then knees, then neck, followed by shoulder. They’ve been lifting, pulling and dragging for years. For example, they could be putting an animal on the back of a trailer and get into a bad position, or they’re lambing and get an injury from lifting.”

O’Connor says that much wear and tear may go unnoticed until an injury occurs. “Farmers are physically conditioned in a way that people in sedentary jobs aren’t. They have wear and tear but because they’re fit and because they’re used to working physically, without an injury it doesn’t cause issues.”

However, when a problem does occur, it’s important to address it quickly. “The longer you ignore it, the more difficult an injury becomes. It’s important to get the appropriate help. There’s no point putting an ice pack on it and hoping it goes away.”

Ignoring symptoms is a common theme. Cardiovascular disease is a significant problem among farmers – a



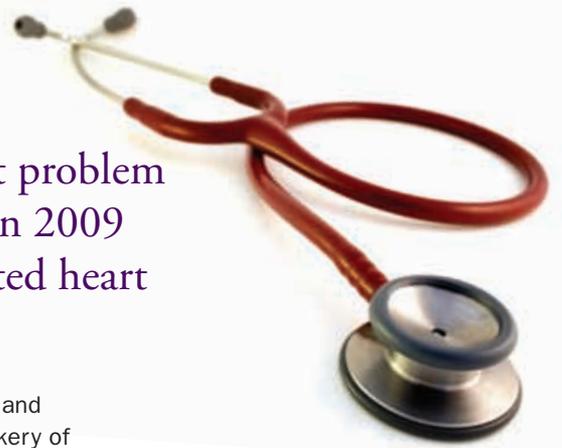
If fresh air, plenty of exercise and an active job are a recipe for good health, then farmers should be some of the fittest specimens in Ireland. But behind the image of the rural idyll lies a very different picture; one of a physically demanding, stressful and often dangerous profession.

John McNamara of Teagasc, which conducted research into the health of farmers in Ireland, says: “Farmers think they’re healthy but they’re not as healthy as they think they are. They’re out in the fresh air and get plenty of outdoor exercise. But research shows that farmers have a higher mortality

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paper published in 2009 showed that 12.5% of farmers reported heart and circulatory problems. However, Ann Scanlon of the Irish Heart Foundation says the risks for farmers are the same as the risks for the general population: “not being active, smoking, high blood pressure and high cholesterol.”

The problem comes when symptoms are swept under the carpet. “Farmers have a higher incidence (of cardiovascular disease) due to late diagnosis; they don’t seek help,” says John McNamara. “This is in common with men worldwide. The consequence is that men die prematurely.” The HSE are currently running a ‘*Farmers Have Hearts*’ campaign in an attempt to tackle this issue.

Of course, physical health is only one side of the story. Stress is also a significant issue for farmers, with factors including long hours, poor working conditions and economic worries. The farming life is relentless: days

off are rare and feeding, milking and cropping schedules make a mockery of fashionable HR concepts like work-life balance and flexible working.

Figures published in 2010 show that farmers are three times as likely to take their own lives as accountants, engineers or solicitors. The Farm and Rural Stress helpline was set up in 2004 to provide a support service for people living in rural areas in Cork and Kerry.

One of the volunteers who runs the helpline says the main issue is currently the economy, although isolation and loneliness are also big issues. “The extended family network is declining because many younger people are moving away,” he says. “Some people will remain in contact on a regular basis. One man rings around the same time every night because he wants someone to talk to and tell about his day.”

While the health risks – both mental and physical – of a farming life are

undoubtedly significant, there are signs that the situation is beginning to improve.

Mary O’Connor certainly believes that farmers are becoming more proactive about their health. “People are better informed now and realise that ignoring a problem doesn’t help. They have to be fit to do their job because hiring staff is expensive. A lot of the younger farmers are involved in sport so they take care of themselves.”

Teagasc’s figures back this up. “There’s national data showing that 29% of farmers used to get a check-up,” says McNamara. “Our figures, although they’re not national, show that now up to 70% of farmers are attending a health professional. The situation isn’t static, it’s changing.”



Resources

- * Download the HSA Code of Practice for Preventing Injury and Occupational Ill Health pack at www.hse.ie
- * If you’re worried about your cardiovascular health, contact the Heart & Stroke Helpline: 1890 432 787
- * Find a chartered physiotherapist in your area at www.iscp.ie
- * Farm and Rural Stress Helpline (6pm-10pm): 1800 742 645
- * Aware: 1890 303 302
- * Samaritans: 1850 60 90 90