

INQUIRY INTO ASPECTS OF AGRICULTURE IN NSW

Organisation: Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health
Name: Professor Brian Kelly
Telephone: (02) 6360 7828
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NSW Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health Drought Mental Health Projects

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The biggest drought in 100 years has devastated much of country NSW and the very fabric that sustains Australian agriculture, families and individuals. The NSW Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health, as part of an all of government approach, has in the face of this calamity, initiated and led service development and research projects to address the mental health impact on farming communities. These activities remain unique and central to government responses and should be enhanced to support New South Wales in the face of significant and ongoing risk factors for the mental health of rural people. Investment in the Centres' activities during this critical time is also an investment in the welfare of the rural Australians who support agriculture.

The NSW Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health (CRRMH), in partnership with NSW Health and the rural Area Mental Health Services have a substantial track record of achievements in responding to the mental health needs of people impacted by drought, through research and the development of strategies to foster service networks and cross agency partnerships in response to the impact of the drought.

The Centre has operated for five years and is funded by a core grant to 2011 from the NSW Health Department, project funding from the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing and research grants obtained in open competition with other research facilities. There are three streams within the Centre-Research, Education and Service Development. Wherever possible the Centre aims to link the activities of the three streams to inform and enhance the work of the four rural area mental health services in New South Wales. In this respect while the Centre is an important part of the University of Newcastle its work is closely integrated with service providers.

Drought Welfare Coordinating Committee

Rural Area Health Services, NSW Health and the CRRMH actively participate as members of the NSW Drought Welfare Coordinating Committee. This Committee, chaired by the Director-General of NSW Premier's Department brings together government and non-government agencies to coordinate efforts in response to drought. The NSW Department of Primary Industries is the lead agency in NSW government response to drought.

Wisdom from the Drought: A consultative Conference

Towards the end of 2003, when there was an uncertain future for the drought mental health support initiatives that were in place in NSW, CRRMH hosted a consultative conference to gather the wisdom of those involved in the drought mental health response thus far. Participants identified:

What works well?

- local interagency partnerships
- capacity building

What could be better? - regional response plan

- mental health workers with focus on farming
- increase the mental health literacy of the community

What to do between droughts? - build and sustain local community capacity

- research into long-term psychosocial impact of drought

A full report of this conference can be found at

http://www.mulganet.net.au/resources/files/4_drought_report.pdf

Rural Mental Health Support Line

CRRMH has a lead role in the implementation of the Rural Mental Health Support Line. This 24 hour, 7 day a week service was put in place by NSW Health for farmers and other rural people in late 2004 and has become an integral part of the projects that involve mental health and wellbeing of people on NSW farms. The Line allows people in rural communities the opportunity to speak with a trained mental health professional about themselves or about a family member, friend or colleague they are worried about. The line can provide on the spot help in an immediate crisis and help with referral to local specialist services. The Rural Support Line continues to be widely promoted to communities affected by drought and other rural disasters. Data from the line suggests that it is being used by the target population, as well as an increasing use by parents and increasing number of people being assessed as high risk to self.

Drought and Mental Health Research

The Centre has undertaken research examining the effects of drought on rural and remote communities. Research participants include farmers, health and agricultural support workers and rural businesses. Information has been collected to help us better understand people's experience of dealing with drought, to hear their particular stories and their perceptions of what is needed. This research effort will be published shortly.

Drought Summit at Parkes and the establishment of the NSW Farmers Association's Mental Health Network

Following the Drought Summit in Parkes in May 2005, NSW Farmers established the Mental Health Network in order to ensure the work of each agency is understood and recognised, and where possible to ensure there is no duplication of effort or resources. CRRMH plays a lead role in this Network, a group of around 20 agencies working to provide practical, evidence based solutions to ensure the health and wellbeing of the farming sector in NSW. Using a plan entitled "A Blueprint for Maintaining the Mental Health and Wellbeing of People on NSW Farms", developed by Associate Professor Lyn Fragar (Australian Centre for Agricultural Health and Safety), the network aims to provide an evidence based framework for interventions to address the risk of mental health problems ranging from improving community support to farmers in general, through to improving access to effective interventions for those experiencing problems. The network aims to understand and recognize the work of each agency and to ensure that there is no duplication of effort or resources. Through this Network NSW Farmers Association received a grant of \$100,000 from the then Minister Assisting the Minister for Health (Mental Health) Cherie Burton, to implement a program of Mental Health First Aid training for people in the farming sector.

Cross agency partnerships

CRRMH has been leading the establishment of local cross-agency partnerships with frontline agricultural support workers (including Department of Primary Industries Drought Support Workers, Rural Financial Counsellors and Rural Lands Protection Board staff) to build better ways of meeting the mental health care needs of farmers and farming communities. Supported by a \$60,000 grant announced by Minister Burton in November 2005, the CRRMH has been developing cross-agency partnerships through the delivery of "Mental Health First Aid" training to workers in the agricultural support sector and providing training to health practitioners regarding the pressures facing farmers (eg financial pressures and drought), and ways of improving access to services when needed. This work has continued since that time and provides the basis for supporting the current Drought Mental Health Assistance Package.

Interstate Collaboration

CRRMH and NSW Farmers' Association have contributed to a workshop convened by CRRMH Queensland with support from AgForce and other government and nongovernment agencies to develop a framework for mental health support of drought affected regions of Queensland. This provides the basis for an ongoing collaboration.

Drought Mental Health Assistance Package

CRRMH provided advice to NSW Government on the development of these measures, announced on 31 October 2006 by the Premier of NSW. The measures included funding for:

- 6 additional mental health workers;
- 15 Farmers Mental Health Gatherings in rural communities;
- 15 Service Network meetings
- 50 Mental Health First Aid training sessions for frontline service providers across the state to confidently identify and refer a person in crisis to appropriate support;
- The development of a mental health resource package for frontline health and agriculture support workers to better integrate services;
- Working in partnership with *beyondblue* to ensure that country families under pressure have access to services addressing depression and anxiety.

The Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health (CRRMH) is overseeing the implementation of the package in collaboration with Area Mental Health Services, the Mental Health and Drug and Alcohol Office of NSW Health and the range of other agencies involved. A broadly based Steering Committee and four (4) working groups have been set up to oversee and provide support for the implementation of the measures. The Steering Committee includes:

- CRRMH
- Rural Area Health Services
- Divisions of General Practice
- NSW Department of Primary Industries
- *beyondblue*
- Mental Health Coordinating Council (MHCC)
- Council of Social Service NSW (NCOSS)
- NSW Farmers
- St Vincent de Paul Society
- State Council of Rural Lands Protection Board

- Australian Rotary Health Research Fund
- Australian Centre for Agricultural Health and Safety
- NSW Government Office of Rural Affairs
- Fishing Industry

Strong links with each of the rural Area Health Services (AHSs) help ensure the smooth running of this initiative. Many of the Area Health Service personnel are involved in the Steering Committee and Working Groups.

The additional workers have been employed by the Area Health Services and are providing outreach services across rural areas, linking mental health services with front-line rural agencies. Workers have been employed in the following locations

- North Coast Area Health Service – Mullumbimby
- Hunter New England Area Health Service – Tamworth
- Greater Southern Area Health Service – Albury and Queanbeyan
- Greater Western Area Health Service – Condobolin and Tottenham

They are liaising closely with Drought Support Workers, Rural Financial Counsellors, Divisions of General Practice, and other “on-ground” workers. CRRMH has facilitated a number of meetings with the workers and their line managers to ensure consistent delivery of the package and sustainability.

To date, Forty Nine (49) **Mental Health First Aid Workshops** have been run with the last to be delivered before the end of Aug. The locations of these workshops have been selected to offer a good spread across the drought affected areas of the state.

Thirteen (13) **Farmers Mental Health Gatherings** have been run of the seventeen (17) planned. The Department of Primary Industries has offered to pay for an extra two in addition to the 15 announced by the Premier to allow for a better coverage of affected areas. The aims of the Gatherings are to

- Increase mental health literacy
- Reduce stigma
- Reveal clear pathways to care that farming families can use if needed

Thirteen (13) **Service Network Meetings** have been successfully run across the state. These facilitated meetings aim to create a local service network of health and non-health workers. The local network can develop a local strategy for improving the mental health care to their rural community, through improving the knowledge and confidence of service providers in working with farmers, small businesses, rural communities and each other. This service network strategy aims to decrease barriers to access to services, and to provide appropriate information about mental illness and the services which are available to rural communities.

A number of **key media messages** have been developed by the Communications Working Group that can be used by Area Health Service Media officers and other partners working on the package.

The Resource Development Working Group has developed **resource packages** of materials that are distributed at various functions. Where suitable resources can be obtained from our key

partners this material is being included to avoid duplication and additional costs. A resource is also being developed to help service providers work more closely with each other and improve pathways to care.

The implementation of the measures within the drought mental health assistance package provides an important opportunity to better meet the needs of farming communities. This will be achieved best where all facets of public health services work together with agricultural organisations and other health and welfare NGOs. The broader aims of these measures are to improve local service coordination, develop more efficient use of existing services and work closely with front-line agricultural agencies that are most closely involved with farmers.

Evaluating the impact of these initiatives

The development of the evaluation framework for these cross-agency strategies is being supported by:

- a Grant-In-Aid from the Australian Rotary Health Research Fund (ARHRF) (\$32,000 in 2005/06) and
- a further grant from the Australian Rotary Health Research Foundation (\$58,000 in 2007/08).

Work arising from the grant-in-aid has recently been published:

Fuller, J. et al (2007) Use of social network analysis to describe service links for farmers' mental health. *Australian Journal of Rural Health*, 15, 99-106.

National Suicide Prevention Strategy: FarmLink Project - \$915,000

This project will employ a Project Manager and four senior clinical positions during 2007 and 2008 to provide support for the establishment phase of a Farmers' Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy for rural Area Health Services. This local action sits within the broader framework of the "Blueprint" developed by the NSW Farmers' Association and complements the current work being undertaken through the Drought Mental Health Assistance Package. These positions will enable health services to:

- establish and formalise local links with front-line agricultural support agencies;
- provide Mental Health First Aid training to assist agricultural support workers to recognise and respond to distress;
- increase health service workers understanding of the stressors confronting farmers and the particular barriers they face to access health care;
- identify opportunities for promotion and early intervention; and
- improve referral pathways to health services for mental health care for farmers through the establishment of local service networks.

This project represents a longer term strategic responses to hardship in rural communities and the farming sector.

About the Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health (CRRMH)

The Centre was established in 2001 and continues as a major partnership between the University of Newcastle, the Mental Health and Drug and Alcohol Office of NSW Health and the Greater Western Area Health Service. It aims to improve the mental health of people in rural areas through

academic leadership, partnerships and achievements in research, education, service planning and policy development.

Professor Brian Kelly
Director
Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health