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In search of farmer wellbeing

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ABSTRACT

The mental health and wellbeing of farmers has become an issue of concern for the UK agriculture community. The author used the opportunity of a Nuffield Farming Scholarship to explore how other farming nations are experiencing this challenge. The author suggests there is much we can learn, particularly from the approach taken by Australia and New Zealand.

KEYWORDS: mental health; stress; suicide; resilience; United Kingdom

Whilst it was once seldom talked about, the agriculture community is now increasingly speaking out on the issue of mental health. It is widely acknowledged that agriculture and horticulture can be a highly stressful occupation and the industry is exposed to a unique set of circumstances and stressors. Long hours (often spent working alone), rural remoteness, the unpredictability of weather, downward price pressure, market volatility, masses of 'red tape' not to mention the 'glass bowl effect' of living one's life in a small, rural community – these are just some of the stressors facing many farmers and growers.

It has undoubtedly been a turbulent few years for United Kingdom (UK) agriculture. Farming welfare charities report increasing numbers of calls to their helplines suggesting levels of stress, depression and burnout amongst farmers are on the rise. Stress is often thought to be a key factor in many of the accidents, injuries and illnesses taking place on farms as people become prone to risky decisions or driven to carelessness when stressed, tired and lacking sharpness. It is also important to recognise that untreated, unaddressed depression can increase the possible risk of suicide. Unfortunately, England's national suicide prevention strategy identifies farmers as one of the occupational groups with the highest risk of suicide (Department of Health, 2012). Meanwhile, suicide itself is now the single biggest cause of death for men aged 20-49 years in England and Wales (Office for National Statistics 2015).

Sadly, mental health is one of the biggest health challenges facing society today. One in four people in the UK are likely to experience a mental health difficulty in any given year (Mental Health Foundation 2015). Although attitudes are gradually changing, it remains a taboo topic for many. This is particularly thought to be the case for a lot of farming men where a level of social conditioning over generations is thought to have reinforced a view of masculinity whereby men are expected to be tough, self-reliant and successful. This can exacerbate the stigma around mental health as it means admitting to struggle and having to ask for support is taken as evidence of personal weakness or failure. This often hinders people's willingness to speak about the issue and to seek help for

themselves. A recent study by the Irish Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy found the farming community the group least likely to talk to a friend about stress or depression with just 31% saying they had done so compared to the national average of 49%. Just 7% of respondents from the farming community said they would speak to a doctor and only 5% said they would speak to a counsellor or psychotherapist about personal problems compared to a national average of 21% and 13% respectively (Irish Farmers Journal 2015).

I am certainly not attempting to paint a picture where all farmers and growers are stressed out, depressed or suicidal. However, high levels of stress and poor mental health are becoming an issue of concern. Having spent my career working in the agriculture industry whilst also being a practicing counsellor and therapist, this is an issue which is of great interest to me. On that note I was fortunate to be awarded a Nuffield Farming Scholarship made possible through the support of the John Oldacre Foundation. This allowed me to explore how other countries are experiencing this challenge in their farming communities.

In addition to Europe, my studies took me to Australia and New Zealand. Both countries are facing significant challenges with rural mental health and farmer suicide. However, I found a lot of encouraging activity underway seeking to address this. What are some of the things they are doing and what might we learn from their approach?

Whilst mental health in UK farming is clearly acknowledged as a problem and whilst many people working in the industry can confidently supply anecdotal examples that highlight this, we are perhaps lacking in measurement or hard data that would help give a much more detailed idea of the extent of the problem. It could be argued therefore that the true scale of the problem remains unknown and similarly the effectiveness of initiatives to address the problem are perhaps not as understood as they could.

By comparison both Australia and New Zealand have invested in developing robust data. This has included commissioning academic research, as well as capturing practical data through farmer surveys. Dedicated health

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and lifestyle drop-in clinics have been a feature at agricultural shows and farm events in both countries for several years now. These initiatives have gathered anonymous data from thousands of farmer interviews and assessments to build up a measurable picture of levels of stress, depression and burnout. Faced with such detailed evidence of the extent of the problem, their governments, farming industry and wider society has had little choice but to acknowledge and address a problem that is often hidden and to make more funding and resources available for the industry to utilise.

Australia is fortunate to have specialist institutions such as the Centre for Rural & Remote Mental Health and the National Centre for Farmer Health. Both focus on translating research into practical intervention strategies to improve rural mental health and wellbeing. Whilst we do not have such equivalents in the UK it's important to find routes by which we can further develop our evidence base in this area. This might include collating existing data into more practical, meaningful form or using mechanisms within farmer organisations, government agencies and the media to regularly survey and collect data on issues of stress and mental health among farmers.

I witnessed a concerted effort to increase farmer knowledge of mental and emotional health through use of specialised literature, online initiatives, educational workshops, themed events, training as well as widespread use of the agricultural press to get messages out to the industry. This is helping to encourage open discussion, dispel myths and normalise the issue so that associated shame, stigma and taboo is gradually eroded thereby making it easier for people to ask for help.

Work is underway to train the whole supply chain in mental health awareness and suicide prevention skills. This has been done by developing educational workshops and structured training programmes specifically for the farming industry. With the help of extension advisory services, these have been rolled out nationally across New Zealand to farmers and rural community groups. Most importantly they have targeted those associated rural professionals who are venturing down farm drives every day such as vets, agrochemical reps, bank managers and accountants etc. The aim is to develop a vast rural detection network skilled in spotting warning signs of possible distress in people, confident to engage in supportive conversation with those who may be struggling and knowledgeable of services to which those in difficulty could be referred.

Whilst there are small pockets of activity where this sort of training is happening in the UK, the upskilling of farming communities and the wider rural workforce in this fashion really needs to be accelerated. It was also interesting to learn that the topic of mental health and wellbeing has been successfully integrated into the curriculums of leading agricultural colleges in New Zealand. Should we be aiming for the same across land-based, educational institutions in the UK? Investment in this area is necessary if we want future farmers to be well equipped to understand the many stresses of running a farm business and for them to learn healthy strategies for looking after their mental and emotional wellbeing.

Perhaps the most impressive aspect of both countries engagement on the topic of farmer mental health is the way essential, emergency-type response work 'downstream', is being balanced with more pro-active, preventative

initiatives 'upstream'. Downstream it's about having a strong foundation of services and facilities in place to help those presenting as stressed, exhausted, overwhelmed or close to breaking point. Meanwhile upstream initiatives are focussed on improving awareness of individual wellbeing and supporting farmers to develop healthy skills and strategies so they are better placed to cope with the ups and downs of farming life.

This upstream activity aims to reduce the number of farmers needing to approach more 'emergency'-type clinical or medical services. It also aims to ensure that they are sufficiently informed and aware so if they do begin to struggle that they seek out help in good time.

Delivering health provision and access to services in more remote, rural areas of the UK remains an ongoing policy challenge. However, the UK is nevertheless fortunate to have some excellent farming welfare charities working in this 'downstream space'. Whilst they offer various forms of support, their work by its nature tends to be reactive with their limited resources rightly prioritised to focus on those in most immediate need. Therefore, appropriate routes to deliver upstream, preventative activity need to be found. Impressively, in New Zealand, this has been achieved by respected, leading organisations within the agriculture and rural sector stepping into this upstream space. For instance, this includes the farm extension service, DairyNZ as well as a dedicated farmer wellbeing initiative named 'Farmstrong', which has been funded by commercial agricultural organisations. Is there a role therefore for some of the UK's leading farmer-facing organisations to become more actively involved imparting practical, proactive measures on wellbeing to farmers?

In this upstream space the conversation is moving to one of, 'How can we help farmers improve their overall wellbeing and ensure they are better placed to deal with the stresses and pressures of farming?' 'Resilience' has become something of a buzz word in agriculture in recent years. Whilst it's common to hear talk of crop resilience, soil resilience, resilient farm systems etc., in the same way, it's important to consider how we can build up our mental and emotional resilience. Resilience can broadly be defined as one's willingness and capacity to manage and cope with stresses. It is about understanding and accepting there will be both good and difficult times and consequently having supportive strategies to manage one's thoughts, behaviour and reactions. Resilience doesn't mean complete elimination of stress as a certain amount of stress is necessary to help us achieve goals in our life. Yet having emotional resilience means we can adapt and move forward in a positive direction amid adversity.

During my Nuffield travels I encountered farm extension services delivering workshops on 'Positive Thinking', kiwifruit growers learning practical breathing techniques to help them better manage stress, farmer groups being coached by 'sleep doctors' to help them achieve a restful sleep and even farmers learning 'Tractor Yoga'. By using credible, evidence-informed techniques to help farmers invest in building their inner resilience the idea is to help farming populations stay healthy and productive in these difficult, pressurised times.

In summary, it seemed to me that Australia and New Zealand are really beginning to recognise that we cannot have a profitable and productive agriculture and horticulture industry without healthy and resilient people at its centre. I believe this a message we all need to take

to heart during these difficult and uncertain times for the farming industry in the UK and beyond.

About the author

Aarun Naik is a counsellor and psychotherapist with a background in the agriculture and horticulture industry. He is based in the North West of England and has a particular interest in farmer wellbeing. He also delivers mental health awareness training to farmer groups and organisations working in the agriculture sector. He is a UK Nuffield Farming Scholar. His Nuffield report, “Supporting farmer wellbeing: addressing mental health in agriculture and horticulture” can be viewed at www.nuffieldinternational.org/rep_pdf/1476692236Aarun-Naik-report-2015.pdf

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