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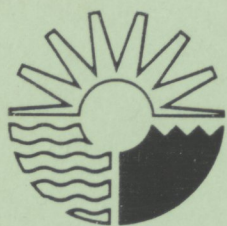
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**Centre for Agricultural  
Strategy**

**AGRICULTURE AND  
HUMAN HEALTH**

Edited by J L Jollans

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**Institute of Agricultural  
Medicine and Rehabilitation**



## **Discussion group I**

### **Farming organisation, systems and methods**

**A KORBAY**

#### **THE FIELD FOR DISCUSSION**

After introductions the Chairman listed the headings which would be the framework of the consideration of the papers presented. They are:

- (i) We are talking about British . . . .
  - a) livestock farming
  - b) arable farming
  - c) horticulture
  - d) food processing
  
- (ii) For the sake of time and the wish to complete a satisfactory discussion, we must confine ourselves to Britain but not forget the EEC.
  
- (iii) Nevertheless we should not exclude experiences and comments covering a wide aspect of our subject but remarks must be relevant to our theme.
  
- (iv) We are talking of all the humans connected with the industries including:
  - a) Male full time workers
  - b) Female full time workers
  - c) Male and female part-timers
  - d) Wives or husbands of full time workers who are in non-connected positions

- e) New entrants
  - f) Children and other dependants of full time workers
  - g) The retired and redundant.
- (v) Social and health implications of working in the industries.
- (vi) Future trends and possible actions required.
- (vii) Define
- What farming organisation(s)?
  - What agricultural systems?
  - What methods?
- (viii) What is unsatisfactory at present in the industries considered? Specific problems? Their actual importance.
- a) Direct effects on workers due to chemicals, drugs, dust, mud, noise, pathogens, minerals, additives etc.
  - b) Direct problems to consumers of products.
  - c) What standards would be set?  
What are the economics?  
Can they be sensible policed?
- (ix) Health - "A state of complete physical and mental well being" is this right?
- (x) Expectations - comparisons - points of view and upbringing.

#### INTENSIFICATION OF FARMING

Certain aspects of the unquestioned intensification of British agriculture were brought up.

##### The human element

- (i) With ever-increasing specialisation of operations an operative may have to spend the whole day using only one series of muscles and tendons which in the end have been known to break down or become diseased eg. tenosynovitis and carpal tunnel disease of workers in a turkey processing line.
- (ii) We should be aware of the possibility of this type of problem brought on by expansion and intensification of agricultural units.
- (iii) The problem of setting the right pace of work arose and it was pointed out that workers may introduce what appears to be a less efficient work pattern merely to achieve a work rate that they can sustain for long periods, eg. walking a few paces to collect boxes which could be stacked nearer a packing point.

### Product Quality

- (i) Some members felt that the food produced by intensive methods was less tasty eg. broilers and pork. In many cases this is probably the comparison of the product of fast grown and very young material with mature material produced by more traditional and less hygienic methods.
- (ii) The possibility of reduction in choice between varieties of the same product was aired; it was contended that with intensification, mechanisation and strict accounting some variety would no longer be produced eg. Cox orange pippin apples.
- (iii) It was suggested that intensive units presented sickly animals to the market and that intensification allowed diseases amongst the stock to increase; this view was not picked up and discussed.

### Generally

Intensification can be counterproductive past a certain point but there are advantages in being part of a large organisation because of the specialisation possibility and worker benefits.

### TRAINING

- (i) The subject Health and Safety recurred frequently and the group was disturbed that a satisfactory way of ensuring effective on-farm safety was not immediately apparent.
- (ii) The approach to this problem in Spain was described. It seems that no attempt there is made to check health and safety at place of work but the subject is part of the regular school curriculum and particularly at primary school level.
- (iii) The group was sure that Health and Safety should be an important part of all education and be part of the courses at Primary and Secondary schools, County Agricultural Colleges, Universities and also part of the course of the entrants in the new Youth Training Scheme. The ATB also should continue to play its part.
- (iv) We should ensure adequate health and safety training at each level of entry to the industry, particularly to our New Entrants.
- (v) Technical training was discussed, mainly in the context again of health and safety but also as a factor in the avoidance of depression in that there is less stress on an individual when doing a job for which he has been properly trained.

Other points made under the training heading:-

- (vi) Farmers should allocate time for training new entrants.

- (vii) We must be constantly alert to identify change.
- (viii) Young persons are much more safety conscious than old.
- (ix) Untrained persons should not be put on specialist and possibly dangerous jobs.
- (x) Trainers should be carefully chosen so as not to perpetuate bad practices.
- (xi) The urban misapprehension that idiots of low intelligence are most suitable for farm employment must be discouraged.
- (xii) How can we motivate all to recognise that Health and Safety is an important part of life?

#### CHILDREN IN AGRICULTURE

The following points were raised.

- (i) Although any death is one too many the absolute figures are low for the numbers in the agricultural population.
- (ii) Farms are homes, all children face hazards and must do so to develop. A farm is the best place to rear a family. Further legislation is unlikely to improve the situation as a high proportion of incidents are one-off odd happenings.
- (iii) Adults contribute to child accidents by breaking the law especially regarding lifts on tractors and machinery.
- (iv) Existing legislation needs re-emphasising and perhaps re-examination.
- (v) Media publicity is needed and possibly paid or public information on TV films near farming programmes. Also radio, press. Some adverse criticism of current show exhibits; regarded as unattractive.
- (vi) The type of material to be presented was covered; it was agreed that the horror approach could have educational value.
- (vii) A programme to heighten awareness has already been detailed under 'training'.
- (viii) The increase in Pick Your Own (PYO) schemes introducing whole families to the countryside, sometimes for the first time, needs study to see if any hazardous situations are likely to arise.

## HEALTH AND SAFETY

### Farmers' lung

- (i) The concept of this disease being rare was challenged (see Chapter B2) and it was felt more investigation was required. It is understood that this is the subject of current research.
- (ii) It was felt that more research into the design and use of masks was needed.
- (iii) If the source of the air contamination can be eliminated, this would be the most desirable way of dealing with the problem.
- (iv) An early warning system for farmers of the possibility of products being the source of contaminants at a critical time was put forward. (Probably impractical as it is the storage and subsequent use over a period which can give rise to mould spores at almost any time.)

### Asphyxiation in closed vessels (eg. silos, cesspits etc.)

- (i) The dangers were re-emphasised.
- (ii) As far as practical such vessels should be locked and the key held by a responsible person.

### Awareness of danger

Much time was spent on this subject due to the difficulty of applying practices usually applied in places with many people in small areas (factories) to large areas (farms) with only 1 to 4 persons and a very loose management structure.

The points arising can be summarised as follows:

- (i) Control access to the work area.
- (ii) Lock up what should be locked up.
- (iii) Produce codes of practice and standard procedures.
- (iv) Warning signs, labels, manuals, cards, notices or leaflets where appropriate.
- (v) Keep up to date, especially when new equipment or products are introduced.
- (vi) Test procedures.
- (vii) Allocate sufficient time so there is no need for short cuts.

- (viii) Develop health and safety awareness in all concerned.
- (ix) Use common sense.

Protecting the worker (see Chapter B8)

- (i) Hands; more research needed. Gloves used are what can be manufactured and sold profitably rather than what is actually required.
- (ii) Feet; the situation is satisfactory in that suitable footwear is available but it is not always purchased and used, eg. cheap plastic slippery gum boots in use where a stouter non-slip boot should be worn.
- (iii) Protective clothing; the group was attracted by the suggestion that there should be recommendations for protective clothing for several classes of farm worker. Action needed is - decide what is needed: check what is already available.

Already many groups of countryside people wear purpose-designed clothes eg. foresters, fishermen, lorry drivers, milk tanker-drivers.

It was felt that a type of uniform would give more protection and enhance status and pride in the job.

Comfort and hygiene

Although it is realised that legislation already exists regarding sanitary facilities, it was suggested that a good quality place for clothing, changing, washing and perhaps eating was a worthwhile investment. This place also should be the site for notices including those dealing with health and safety.

Alcohol and fatigue

On the whole the group thought that this was not a problem during working time. Nevertheless, some form of inquiry is needed to establish what the true situation is.

Drugs, sprays, pesticides, feed and silage, additives, fertilisers

- (i) There is a general disquiet about the use of many of these materials, in spite of numerous reassurances by official bodies and manufacturers. This should be investigated and recommendations made for action if needed.
- (ii) Labelling of products brought the following recommendations (some of which may well be covered by existing legislation).

- (a) Is type, size and detail of declaration good enough?
- (b) Can a data card or sheet be obtained?
- (c) Do imported materials reach the same standards of safety and labelling as the home produced product?
- (iii) It was noted that there is no worker representation on the Scientific Advisory Committee of the P S B S.
- (iv) It was suggested that an extension of the "yellow card" monitoring system, used in the medical profession for monitoring the effects of drugs, could be extended to detect any adverse effect of agricultural chemicals. It was pointed out that the Yellow Card system itself is not always particularly effective.
- (v) Information on product usage recommendations seemed to have gaps though it was eventually realised that very full information can usually be obtained from the manufacturer. In addition all poisonous materials are now listed in the Central Poisons Computer Programme.
- (vi) It was pointed out that the more information that is given in directions for use on the container, the more the manufacturer is delegating method of use to the user.
- (vii) Rodenticides had a brief mention and again care and responsibility was urged but no real problem appears.

#### Artificial fertilisers

The only mention of these concerned nitrates and nitrites and the increasing levels in both ground water and water courses.

So far this does not appear to be a problem and nitrate in water is natural, but levels are increasing. It was suggested that an epidemiologist and the Water Boards should work together to advise whether a problem is arising and if action is needed.

#### MENTAL HEALTH AND DEPRESSION

- (i) Is the incidence of depression (about 36%) found by Dr Waring in the population he studied typical of agricultural situations? (See Chapter B10). The figures in the discussion document suggest not.
- (ii) With suicide in men, the low incidence amongst farmers on their own account contrasts with the high figure of farmers with employees and farm managers and it is suggested that managerial stress is present in the group; but the figure is high also with farm workers. It is suggested by some that the means available

for suicide on farms (eg. shotguns) are so much more effective than in urban populations, who choose medicinal tablets which are very much less certain! Thus the farm suicide rate is higher than with other groups.

- (iii) The tied cottage came up and it was felt that very little extra stress was caused by living in a tied cottage.
- (iv) Since stress (and subsequent depression) can be caused by anxiety and a feeling of being unable to cope with an existing situation, better training can help reduce the problem.
- (v) In the same vein more formal consultation between the farm management and the staff can help to reduce anxiety and depression. We must see how more consultation in this way can be encouraged.