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Centre for Agricultural Strategy

AGRICULTURE AND HUMAN HEALTH

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**Institute of Agricultural
Medicine and Rehabilitation**



Discussion group IV

Collaboration in research

D C SNASHALL

The group looked in some depth at a number of specific problems, and from detailed discussions identified several underlying themes that cut across the specific problems and appeared to warrant further attention.

In a discussion of farmers lung, the need for any study of such a problem to be multidisciplinary emerged. Medical practitioners have a considerable knowledge of the disease as seen in patients and of the methods of treating it. Preventing its occurrence, however, requires a detailed knowledge of farming practice, as prevention involves the avoidance of working with items such as mouldy hay in which the relevant fungus develops, and preventing the fungus from developing. Clearly tackling this problem successfully requires a combined group approach by medical people, agricultural scientists and farmers. And the course of the discussion suggested that the very first thing such a group should do was to define all the areas affecting the origin, course and treatment of the disease in such a way that people from all the different disciplines had a clear understanding of the problem right across the disciplinary boundaries. The lack of this understanding was highlighted during the discussion.

The picture was further complicated by a recognition that the farmers most at risk are small farmers in the less prosperous areas. It was noted that these people tend not to take out health insurance, in common with most farmers are very reluctant to visit doctors, and do not receive national insurance payments related to employment as they are mainly self-employed. They therefore tend to be omitted from the more usual statistical records which tend to be based on data from these sources. The very extent of the problem, and the degree to which it warrants further investigation, is therefore not known.

The lack of reliable, comprehensive statistical data was further emphasized in discussions of chlorine poisoning from cleaning milk tanks, the use of other chemicals and pesticides on farms, and of accidents on farms.

In considering the wider field of farming activity and the nutrition of the nation it appeared that there was a lack of clear national aims for agriculture and for food that took into account the nutritional needs and preferences of the nation and the production aims and abilities of the nations' agriculture. Many economic, health and social factors are involved but it appears that it is all too easy for government and other groups at national level in the fields of agriculture and health to be working at cross-purposes. Again the problems were recognised as being multidisciplinary and if realistic food policies are to be developed, studies will be required in which farmers, agriculturalists and veterinarians, food scientists and nutritionists, medical scientists and food industry people are all involved. Again, one of the major impressions gained by members of the group was how much members from a different discipline were able to contribute to the understanding of a common problem.

In conclusion, the group identified three underlying themes that it saw as cutting across more specific problems, they are:

- (i) The need for better statistical data. This includes a need for background, base data on the rural population, and the need for farming community surveys of health status to establish what the real situation is.
- (ii) The need for the establishment of a multidisciplinary group when a specific problem area is suspected. Where agriculture and human health are concerned there is a clear need for such a group to define the parameters of the whole problem.
- (iii) The need for a multidisciplinary study of the nutrition of the nation with a view to providing the basis for a national food policy. The study would need to identify the potential conflicts of interest between primary food producers, food processors and the health and well being of consumers, consider how these conflicts might be overcome, and identify common goals for the agriculture and food industries.