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Crisis on the family farm: ethics or economics?

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Crisis on the family farm: a matter of life or death

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INTRODUCTION

Although I particularly want to talk to you about the pressures of life on the family farm, I will start by telling you a little about the Samaritans and how we operate. There is still, unfortunately, widespread confusion about the service we provide. We are probably partly to blame for this because, until fairly recently, the organisation adopted a very low profile.

The movement was founded by Chad Varah in London 40 years ago, when he set up a service for the suicidal with himself as the expert. He was soon overwhelmed with people wanting to talk with him, so he asked some of his parishioners to serve tea and make the callers comfortable while they waited. To his surprise, he found that many people were not staying to see him. The opportunity to talk to someone, who had the time to listen, had been sufficient, so he began to train people to do just that - listen.

From that small beginning the movement in the UK has now grown to 198 branches with 22 000 volunteers who, last year, took over 2.5 million calls. I ought perhaps to mention that, although our founder was a clergyman, we are not a religious organisation. The aim of the Samaritans is to befriend the isolated, despairing and suicidal, those for whom life may be getting too much to bear, ordinary people of all ages and all social classes.

Feelings of despair are the same whoever you are, whatever you do, wherever you may be. Our callers have the same sort of problems that you or I may have experienced, the only difference being that they are unable to cope at the time perhaps without the support

or love from family or friends. They don't know where to turn next. Mostly they don't want to die, they just don't want to carry on living as they are.

Every year over 200 000 people in the UK attempt suicide and around 4500 succeed, that is one death every two hours. Yet for someone who is feeling desperate, there is a chance to talk and to be listened to. Sometimes it helps to talk to someone you don't know, someone you may never need to speak to or see again and who will not need to be around when you are through the crisis. That is where the Samaritans come in. Our volunteers offer time, space, confidentiality, a chance to talk and a willingness to listen. T S Eliot had a line which captured it beautifully: "the luxury of an intimate disclosure to a stranger".

Our service is totally confidential. Nothing a caller tells us will be communicated to anyone outside the movement, unless the caller freely gives permission. Our callers can remain anonymous if they wish and can contact us 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. No appointment is necessary and the service is totally free.

THE CRISIS ON THE FAMILY FARM

So, how does the work of the Samaritans relate to the crisis on the family farm? Crisis means a 'time of difficulty or distress', but it also means a turning point which can lead to a positive outcome. The uncertainty and change which we are experiencing in farming at the moment is creating tremendous stress which can affect physical and mental health, efficiency and relationships. Sadly, some farmers have seen suicide as the only way out.

The whole question of what leads one person to take their own life and someone else faced with what appears to be similar problems to survive, is a very complex one. The final reasons that drive people to the point of feeling that death is the only option are as varied as the people who are despairing. A final tax demand, the total breakdown of a piece of equipment at a crucial time, the decision to have to make a long term farmworker redundant or the loss of a favourite sheepdog could be the last straw that forces a person to breaking point. One can, however, identify four factors which affect all farmers to a greater or lesser extent, but are particularly important in the context of the smaller independent family farm with which we are especially concerned at this conference. I would like to spend a few minutes talking about these.

First, there are the economic pressures which Professor Furness has discussed (Furness, 1996). One aspect of this has been the effect that economic circumstances have on the free time and financial resources which enable a farmer to live a full and varied life. Working, in many cases on his own, he has little time or energy to attend NFU meetings

or attend the Parish Council or the money to go away on holiday. Many farmers say they have lost their interest and enjoyment in farming and are feeling trapped by their financial constraints.

Second, there is the political uncertainty - so much of what happens seems to be subject to political horsetrading in Whitehall, Brussels, or Uruguay. Farmers are subject to decisions, which are not understood and appear to change more quickly than the lead time for farm-business planning. This only adds to the feeling of just being a pawn on the board and of being submerged in a torrent of forms and regulations.

The recent documentation in connection with applications for Set-aside is a prime example. It is one thing for the large estate with a farm office and specialist staff. It is quite another for the small farmer trying to cope with complicated Set-aside forms, a deadline for application and a fear of getting it wrong. It does appear that under the EC reforms agreed last year, the bulk of the money is going to the largest farming businesses. There are certainly great advantages in large-scale farming: machinery is more effective and staff fully utilised. A small family farm is tied to one location and, unless it is in the right part of the country, it is not possible to diversify into caravan sites or golf courses.

The third factor is physical isolation. Over 14 000 people left the agricultural industry last year, and MAFF estimated that for every 132 hectares of land set aside, one agricultural worker will become redundant. The decrease in the work force and this 'human Set-aside' mean that in many instances, there is no more working in gangs or teams. We know the prime cause of death on farms is accidents.

> How many of these are due to working alone with machinery with no-one on hand to call to for help, or to switch off the machine?
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> How many accidents result from sheer physical and mental exhaustion following hours working on one's own with too much time to think and worry?
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> How many farmers keep going when ill, just because there is no one else available?
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> How many go home at lunch time to an empty kitchen and eat a cheese sandwich whilst going through the bills on the table?
>
> How many marriages are put under strain because husband and wife hardly see each other?

The fourth factor is the cultural isolation that farmers now feel. The population turnover in rural areas has left farmers relatively isolated. They feel squeezed between the hard realities of their existence and the demands of incomers with their poor understanding of rural life and their complaints about smells and noise. They tell us they feel outcasts in their own village pub.

Many farmers are faced with the demoralising feeling of living in a

community that has lost sympathy with them, and has no understanding of their problems. One farmer said: "you find you are a stranger living out on the edge and you no longer know anyone". Above all, perhaps, is the sense of identity that family farmers in particular have with their farms. These may have been in the family for years and to lose the land is to lose part of themselves. They feel that not only have they let down the current generation, but they have failed to live up to the expectations of previous ones. There are few occupations which carry this sense of history and identification.

Taking all these factors together, it is not surprising, therefore, that farmers are twice as likely to commit suicide as the average member of the public. It is now the second most common form of death for male farmers under 45 and farming is fourth in the list of occupational suicides. The recorded suicides do not give the full picture. Many coroners, themselves part of the community and aware of the social and insurance implications, record open verdicts or misadventure whenever possible. Bear in mind too that, for a verdict of suicide to be returned, the requirement is 'beyond reasonable doubt'. It is perhaps significant that the percentage of undetermined deaths for farmers is very high.

What is undeniable is, that unless farmers and their families can be made aware that they are not alone, and there are those who do understand and can help, the deaths will continue. So what do we need to do and what are we already doing to try and ensure that people choose life rather than death? I would like, now, to tell you a little of what the Samaritans have been doing, firstly on their own, and, more recently, with other organisations.

THE SAMARITANS' RESPONSE

Despite our large number of contacts, over recent years we realised that certain high-risk groups were under-represented amongst our callers, particularly those in the farming community. Samaritan Branches are in towns and many who live in the countryside feel that our volunteers are townspeople who don't understand their problems (although, in fact, there are a number of us who are farmers or farmers' wives). We know that, in order to provide support for people in rural areas, we have to publicise our work better, and several years ago, at the Royal Show, we launched our Rural Outreach Programme with two basic arms.

The first was to reach as many individuals in rural areas as possible with a direct message about the work of the Samaritans, particularly stressing our confidentiality and availability. People do not have to be on the point of suicide before contacting us. We would obviously like them to talk to us before they get to that stage.

It is important to stress that we do not solve problems or give advice,

neither do we interfere with what other organisations are doing, but talking through problems really does help. Sharing fears and feelings with someone who is able to empathise gives strength and support. This in turn clears the mind so that they can see for themselves that there may be solutions they had not previously considered.

In order to achieve this aim we have increased our publicity to rural areas, through the national press and media, local papers and agricultural magazines. We take our Samaritan caravans to markets on market days and our large mobile centre to as many agricultural shows as possible. If people do not know about the Samaritans and what we do then we cannot begin to help.

Our second aim was to interest organisations who are in regular contact with the farming community to use us as a resource either by recommendation of our services or by making a third-party call. I would like to emphasise the fact that the Samaritans will respond to a third-party call made on behalf of another person. The approach will be handled sensitively and the name of the referrer need not necessarily be disclosed.

Particularly, with third-party calls in mind, we have given talks to NFU regional meetings, the Country Landowners' Association, the Agricultural Training Board, Young Farmers' Clubs, Bank Managers and many more. We have had a small card printed, which lists the pointers to suicide. I hope this gives you a picture of the Samaritans' response to the rural problems. What is vital I believe, if there is to be a reduction in farming suicides, is for there to be a partnership between all those concerned about the farming community.

This was the basis for the first county rural initiative. In Herefordshire an investigation, led by the Agricultural Chaplain, resulted in a report which showed that the sense of despondency stretched right across the farming community. As a result, the organisations in the county, who had assisted with the report, decided something should be done to offer support. Rather than set up a new help line which might be difficult to sustain, they would use existing services at minimal cost. This would be publicised by all the agricultural and voluntary services in the county.

A Steering Committee of the Agricultural Chaplain, the Rural Community Council, the Samaritans and the Citizens Advice Bureau was set up and 10 000 cards were printed offering the Samaritans for emotional support and the Citizens Advice Bureau for practical advice. Both these organisations have information about all the other organisations offering care and support. The Duke of Westminster launched this first scheme in January 1992. It was intended to be a pilot scheme and had a lot of publicity. It has resulted in more third-party calls to our Centres from organisations such as the NFU and ADAS and, since the network of the Steering Committee is nationwide, it is

easily adapted by other counties. Shropshire, Montgomeryshire, Suffolk, Wiltshire, Cornwall, Cheshire, Staffordshire, Worcestershire and Kent have set up similar schemes. Hampshire and Northumberland will have launches in April and Derbyshire, Gloucestershire and Oxfordshire in May. Preliminary meetings have taken place in six other counties and also in Scotland. Much of the success has been due to the willingness of all organisations to commit themselves to the objectives of the rural initiatives which are:-

(i) to focus public concern on the plight of the rural communities and in particular farmers, farmworkers, and their families;
(ii) to alert the farming and rural communities to the help that is available.

These schemes have certainly heightened the awareness of farming problems, they have attracted a lot of publicity locally and nationally and they have drawn many people and organisations together in an effort to help. There are here today many people concerned about the family farm. We can each provide a strand of support. Each strand on its own may be fine and delicate, but these individual strands, when woven together form a strong and secure safety net with which to catch those who step off the edge of their life.

Much of this Symposium will be taken up with the economic and other problems that family farms are facing and with the wider political and policy considerations. The Samaritans may not have much to contribute in these areas. We cannot change the problem the farmer is facing, but we may be able to help him change the way he is facing the problem.

The Samaritans do not, of course, have a monopoly on caring for the suicidal and despairing, but our long and deep experience of supporting those in crisis gives us the confidence to continue to participate, wherever we can, in any joint effort to reduce the number of people taking their own lives. We believe we have much to contribute from 40 years' experience in life support and 10 million hours of listening. We know that we have been, for many people poised between choosing life and choosing death, the crucial factor that led them to come down on the side of life. We hope you will encourage those who need us to use us.

REFERENCES

Furness, G (1996) Changes in the economic role and net incomes of small family farms in the United Kingdom. In: Carruthers, S P & Miller, F A (Eds) *Crisis on the family farm: ethics or economics?* CAS Paper 28. Reading: Centre for Agricultural Strategy.

Session 2:
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