

Reducing farming fatalities in Australia—a positive story, but more to come

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Emily Herde is the Farm Injury Research Manager for the National Farm Injury Data Centre, an activity of the Australian Centre for Agricultural Health and Safety (ACAHS), based in Moree on the NSW North West Slopes and Plains. Emily has a Bachelor of Health Science (Public Health), is a registered nurse and has completed her Graduate Certificate in Child and Family Health Nursing. With a background in rural nursing and child injury prevention Emily has held previous positions as a school based youth health nurse and senior project officer for Queensland Health's Child Injury Prevention Project based in Mount Isa Health Service District. Within her role at ACAHS Emily is a committee member of the Australian Water Safety Council as a representative for Farmsafe Australia. Emily also practises as a child health nurse on a part-time basis for Moree Community Health, Hunter New England Area Health Service. With rural living deeply entrenched in her upbringing as a member of a farming family from a grain and beef producing property outside of Goondiwindi Emily along with her physiotherapist brother Ben continue to promote recruitment and retention of allied health professionals to rural Queensland through their jointly owned private physiotherapy practice in Goondiwindi.

Background

Agriculture remains a significant industry in Australia, however the potential for death and serious injury for those working, living or visiting farms is known to be high.

Method

This study draws on the available data from the National Coroners Information System for the period 2003-06. All closed coronial cases that have involved a non-intentional farm injury death are included in the assessment.

Results

There were a total of 326 non-intentional injury deaths on Australian farms from 2003-06. Major findings were:

- continued reduction in the overall number of deaths (mean 82 per year)
- continued reduction in the rates of death for farms (5.9 per 10,000 agricultural establishments)
- continued reduction in the rates of death for individuals working in agriculture (10.9 deaths per 100,000)
- there was an even distribution between work related and non-work related deaths
- males accounted for 87% of all deaths
- tractors, quad bikes and farm utilities continue to be the leading cause of adult (> 15 years) deaths
- those older than 55 years accounted for 40% of all deaths
- children (< 15 years) accounted for 17% (n=55) of all deaths, with those under 5 years being involved in more than half the cases
- farm dams and other water bodies (n=25) continue to be the single largest cause of child (<15 years) deaths
- for children (<15 years), riding or being a passenger on a quad bike (n=7) is the second leading agent of injury death
- overall, 34% (n=19) of all child fatalities involved farm visitors.

Conclusions

Although further cases for the years 2005 and 2006 will be added to this data once the coroners have closed these cases, this is not expected to add dramatically to the case numbers. Hence, even with these additional cases, the steady improvements in industry performance in reducing death rates will be evident.

This review has identified common agents of non-intentional injury death for both adults and children. Significantly, for all of these agents there are already well known and highly effective solutions that can be used to further reduce the burden of non-intentional injury. To continue and fast-track improvement in agriculture's performance, there is a need to improve the adoption of health and safety systems and the evidence-based solutions that already exist. Future interventions should target these priority areas to allow for further significant reductions in farm related deaths.