



# Country life

➤ **Rural stress and depression** have reached almost epidemic proportions. According to the Health and Safety Executive, farmers have the highest rate of suicide in any working group and are twice as likely to commit suicide as a member of the general public. **Elizabeth Gates** reports.

**L**ast year, on the Sunday before Christmas, forty-year-old farmer 'Peter' climbed to the top of a hill where he had played as a child. There – looking across the landscape he had worked all his life – he primed his gun and blew his head off.

Rural stress and depression – which can explode into suicides like Peter's – have reached almost epidemic proportions. According to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), farmers have the highest rate of suicide in any working group and are twice as likely to commit suicide as a member of the general public. Suicide is the second most common cause of death among male farmers under 45. And, HSE warns, suicide is the tip of the rural stress iceberg.

Many reasons account for these exponential stress levels.

David Morgan runs the Bedfordshire & Cambridgeshire Rural Support Group. A retired businessman living in a rural community, he explains: "Isolation is a big issue. Over the years, farms and rural businesses have adapted to government and consumer requirements for food, environmental and welfare issues by becoming more efficient. Usually this meant merging farms so that more modern, larger and faster machinery could be justified. This adaptation has happened for generations and generally has not caused too many problems."

However, he warns, modern equipment

is more reliable, efficient and requires less servicing, and "critically, does not need so many people to operate. Farming is now very lonely".

In Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire, he continues: "800-1,000 acres can be run by one person who rarely sees anyone else during the day. Agricultural engineers and salesmen no longer need to call, and there are no other staff until perhaps harvest."

Devon co-ordinator for the Farm Crisis Network, Brian Warren also holds the current trend towards isolation responsible for rural mental ill health, commenting: "During the foot and mouth outbreak [2001], suicide numbers actually dropped. Because everyone was in the same boat – and started talking to each other – farmers didn't feel so isolated."

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But societal change has impacted in several ways. 'Farmers' wives' were formerly an essential part of the rural support system, cooking for, caring for and listening to the men. But because of financial pressure, 'partners' have had to find other work and, sometimes – as Brian Warren explains – they meet other people – “who don't smell of livestock and who make an effort to impress them. As a result, relationships are at risk.”

David Morgan also comments: “To make a living, diversification is today's great watchword. The majority of farm and food growing businesses need another source of income – usually involving the partner. So – when the couple get in at the end of the day and the kids are attended to – both have their own tensions and problems and are not necessarily as sympathetic or supportive as was once the case. This builds the feeling of isolation and reduces the sense of worth.”

Debt, says Brian Warren, is a further major factor in raised stress, adding: “Borrowings in agriculture are astronomical.”

To illustrate: backed by Lloyds TSB, the Agricultural Mortgage Corporation plc (AMC) currently lends £1.4bn to rural sector businesses. And this market share, AMC admits, represents one third of the AMC target market.

Comments Brian Warren: “Some farmers are OK – they inherited their land. But those who borrow are in trouble. Farmers always believe 'next year is going to be better' but it never is. And then it becomes a matter of pride. They find it hard to ask for help.”

Used to the vagaries of the weather, farmers find the vagaries of economic pressure far more difficult to cope with. For example, they find they have lost control over the prices for their products because of supermarket practices – an eventuality for which they were ill-prepared.

Equally incomprehensible to the farming mentality, warns Brian Warren, is the government policy of 'set-aside'. Acres of the UK now lie fallow and, as Brian Warren explains: “Farmers don't like not using the land to grow food when people in the world are starving.”

Diversification also concerns him. He comments: “Here in Devon, the number of golf courses – created on former farmland – has shot up dramatically. But – even if we get more tourists because people are not going abroad so much – there are only so many people who can play golf and I think we've probably reached saturation point.”

He continues: “Some farms lend them-



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selves to tourism and some don't. There are 14,000 farms packed into Devon – some without telephones and not even connected to mains services. And some farmers have borrowed to convert barns and so on for holiday accommodation and then can't let it!”

The bigger picture is no prettier. The government's role – whether as Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries or, subsequently, the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) – has not been laudable.

Dealing with around 1,000 'cases' each year, for example, the Farm Crisis Network finds many relate to government regulation. Ahead of other stressors, dealing with Defra was the trigger for almost 40% of calls for help in 2005 and approximately 45% in 2006.

And, elsewhere in the industry, observers note government handling of the foot and mouth epidemic is still taking its toll.

As David Morgan explains: “During foot and mouth inoculation was rejected partly on the grounds that it would damage our export trade, although I seem to recall that our beef was banned anyway! But, inoculation was widely used in some European countries and they did not suffer anything like as much as our industry.”

“Some larger businesses were happy to take compensation and have their stock

killed. They couldn't move it or in some cases get feed to it anyway because of the restrictions.

“But the real trauma arose in the case of smaller – often pedigree – herds. Smaller operators had to watch while their cattle – usually with individual names – were shot – often not very efficiently. And their livelihoods vanished on a funeral pyre.

“There were also some extremely harrowing situations where sheep could not be moved due to restrictions and died of hunger or drowned in floods.

“This was all due to total inflexibility in the regulations, but of course not generally publicised. People doing what I do have witnessed the impact on individuals of these things and there must be a better way,” he adds.

Bureaucracy in agricultural industries is nothing new, both David Morgan and Brian Warren would agree. And comments Brian Warren grimly: “Farmers are like babies on a pot. Good at the business but not good at the paperwork.”

“Paperwork,” adds David Morgan, “has magnified incredibly due to regulation.” Some of this is associated with the Single Farm Payment System – which came in (in 2005) to replace Integrated Administration and Control System payments – a series of subsidy payments made under the Common Agricultural Policy of the EEC. ➤



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"This was the much vaunted overhaul of the system which, in theory, decoupled the payments from ever increasing production and was ballyhooed by our Prime Minister. Payments now would be linked to keeping the land in 'good agricultural and environmental condition', and if you wished to grow crops and sell them, you could.

"In practice, you obviously would because you need the income from the crops as well as the so-called subsidy to make any sort of living."

This would be crucial. Figures extracted from a parliamentary question [*Hansard* 9th May 2007, 236W] recently confirmed that approximately 1 in 3 farmers are below the low income threshold (defined as 60% of the average wage).

"So," continues David Morgan, "England's government, wanting reform of the subsidy system elected to go for a very complex hybrid arrangement for allocating payments – part based on historical claims and part based on areas of land, and due to start as early as possible.

"A new claims system was devised with new software at the same time as Defra was attempting to make savings through staff reductions AND moving from a claims-based processing system to a task-based system. This meant in reality, that a claimant had no one person to contact regarding the processing of his claim and any questions or problems – not ideal with a completely new system.

"There were problems getting the software to work, and getting the digital maps on which it was all based processed, leading to

delays and problems with payment.

"Historically payments came in the autumn – if this system had worked, payments would have come in by the March following – already a cash-flow delay – but it did not.

"There was no test run of the software, and up to late March 2006, Defra was insisting that 90% plus payments would be made by the end of March. In the event it was 13%, with many not receiving all their money before December – one year after it used to be paid."

Under Defra, some farmers have not received subsidy money since 2004 and, concludes David Morgan: "The whole system and processing agency – the Rural Payments Agency (RPA) – failed badly and was criticised amazingly fiercely by the recent House of Commons Environment Food and Rural Affairs Committee report which called for named civil servants and ministers to be fired.

"This whole episode – with appalling customer service from the RPA – I have witnessed telephone calls where RPA processing staff have called people, including me, liars – has been very depressing for many farmers and has caused serious financial pressure."

The Arthur Rank Centre – now incorporating the former Rural Stress Information Network – endorses what David Morgan and Brian Warren say.

Spokesperson Karen Ellis adds: "For some people a complete life change is necessary and not all people can adapt easily. Some won't want to leave their community, their village, their church and so on. For others, remaining in the same area but not being

able to farm is too difficult and they need to move away, which can lead to other stresses.

"Farmers are very proud people who don't like to ask for help. Some have never had to ask for help before ... [and] don't like other folks in their community to know that they are in difficulty. They will try to deal with problems themselves and sometimes the problems become overwhelming. Doctors may prescribe anti-depressants but this often doesn't address the underlying mental health concerns of the individual."

All this, says David Morgan, has resulted in "a huge migration of people out of the industry".

But – in more helpful mode and to shore up a stress-stricken sector – Defra developed a *Rural Stress Action Plan* (RSAP). This was first introduced in 2000 – intended to reduce rural stress "by strengthening the provision of support for rural people by influencing mental health and wellbeing services and tackling social and psychological isolation."

As Defra explains, the RSAP supported projects aimed at the following groups of people:

- owners, occupiers and workers on the land;
- people who run small rural businesses and their employees;
- those in debt in rural areas; and
- high-risk occupational groups at risk of suicide, i.e. farmers and agricultural workers.

Projects previously selected for funding under the plan have offered:

- direct support to the target groups;
- support for building the capacity of organisations to provide support to the target groups; and
- support for work to influence policy decisions and practices relating to the mental health and wellbeing of the target groups.

The *Guidelines for Rural Stress Proofing* are published on the Ruralnet UK website (see: [www.ruralnetuk.org/support.htm](http://www.ruralnetuk.org/support.htm)).

And, in 2005, the fifth Rural Stress Action Plan was drawn up by Defra – with the help of the RSAP Working Group comprising experts from rural stress organisations and independent members, including members from MIND, National Institute for Mental Health in England, Citizens Advice Bureau, National Farmers Union, The Samaritans and the T&G Workers' Union.

The RSAP has awarded £900k to nineteen projects due to end this year – with a review commissioned to look at requirements for 2008 and beyond. And, an example of a





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currently running project, the Farm Crisis Network (FCN) is using Defra funding of £56,787 to train its volunteers.

FCN volunteers are screened for natural skills as facilitators although, as Brian Warren explains: “We don’t want people trained so well they think they can deal with every problem. FCN volunteers are farming folk who can talk – and walk with – farming folk. They can identify when to refer them on to professionals – accountants, lawyers, and so on – for specialist advice. But our role is to give practical support when it’s needed.

“And there is a system of support for the volunteers through the structure of the FCN. Farmers and farm workers and their families are supported by the volunteers, the volunteers are supported by the regional co-ordinators, and the co-ordinators are supported by each other and by the national FCN administration.

“But the point is, the earlier people contact the volunteers for support, the more the Farming Crisis Network can do and the less likely folk are to get stressed.”

The role of FCN volunteers at present includes sustaining individual farmers – usually exhausted, beaten down and depressed – in the face of ‘mutually enforcing problems’. An FCN volunteer has to be able to:

- Understand the whole picture
- Try to halt (at least temporarily) incoming pressures, e.g. from creditors, RSPCA or Defra
- Help to identify a first move forward, e.g. clear up a misunderstanding, make an application to RABI or reclaim VAT due
- Link in relevant professional help
- Try to keep all those involved communicating
- Hold the space in which the family make decisions, if they can

For all frontliners, the battle for hearts and minds goes on. Not themselves immune to rural stress, GPs for example are aware of the immensity of the struggle. Royal College of General Practitioners’ (RCGP) chair, Professor Mayur Lakhani commented to *OS&H*: “People who live in a rural environment are one of the high risk groups for suicide. This is a concern for GPs, as they

have to care for such vulnerable people and their carers and family.

“Identifying people who are at risk of suicide is part of the training of all family doctors wherever they work, as is the management of ongoing depression. Close working with specialist mental health teams, and other agencies that can support people who are suicidal, is most likely to achieve success.

“However, there is an issue of health inequalities. We know that services are becoming centralised and that access to health care is problematic for those who live in rural areas. Unfortunately, it is sometimes the case that people with the greatest clinical need live in areas with the least developed services.”

And University of Stirling Professor of Health Research David Peck, writing in *Advances in Psychiatric Treatments* (2005) (Volume: 11, 270 – 276), drew conclusions from the foot and mouth outbreak which could enlighten rural mental health services planners. These conclusions included:

- Most people psychologically affected by the outbreak did not seek help from general practitioners or from specialist services.
- Many farmers do not openly admit to

emotional distress.

- In any future similar crisis, high demand for specialist services should not be expected.
- Specialists could make a greater contribution by working with and training those who are more likely to be asked for support, especially local veterinary surgeons.
- Working closely with farming organisations and local radio would be helpful.
- Printed, telephone and internet self-help advice should be available.
- Computerised cognitive-behavioural therapy might help the minority [willing to] accept specialist support.
- Reaction to the [foot and mouth] outbreak exemplifies how communities successfully develop their own ways of coping with a crisis.

Established good practice in rural communities already reflects some of these conclusions.

For example, a vet referred one of his clients, ‘James’, to the *Farm Crisis Network*. ‘James’ was trying to run his farm and care for his sick elderly mother. He was close to breaking point. His designated FCN volunteer found someone to help with the paperwork, managed by his mother before her illness, and professional caring support. With the help of the RABI, the family received the benefits to which they were entitled. Released from these pressures, ‘James’ could concentrate on the running of the farm. And his life, and sleep patterns, have returned to something like stability. This is one crisis averted.

For help, contact the following organisations:

### Welfare & financial assistance

Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution  
Tel: 01865 727 888 (weekdays office hours). [www.rabi.org.uk](http://www.rabi.org.uk)

### Practical support to farming people

Farm Crisis Network  
Tel: 07002 326326 (7am – 11pm daily) [www.fcn.org.uk](http://www.fcn.org.uk)

### Emotional support

Samaritans  
Tel: 08457 90 90 90 (24 hours a day) [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)

### Advice and guidance

Rural Stress Helpline (Arthur Rank Centre)  
Tel: 024 76 412916 (weekdays 9am – 5pm) [www.arthurrankcentre.org.uk](http://www.arthurrankcentre.org.uk)

For further information, also see *Farmers, Farm Workers and Work-Related Stress* (prepared by the Policy Studies Institute for the Health and Safety Executive 2005) at: [www.hse.gov.uk/research/rrhtm/rr362.htm](http://www.hse.gov.uk/research/rrhtm/rr362.htm)