

## Research Notes provided by Melinda Scheltens (Centrelink Social Worker)

Stayner and Barclay report that whilst farmer may highlight immediate pressures of income support/finances the deep seated causes of stress need further attention. Highlighting the drought as a "crisis" obscures the fact that financial and personal stress area a continually re-occurring feature of the lives of farm families(Stayner and Barclay, 2002)

Accessing Assistance- Feelings of guilt, shame, injustice about who gets what, anger, isolated from discussing financial posn with peers(Stayner and Barclay, 2002).

New Services in town need considerable time to be accepted by community and this should be factored into funding. Whilst funding bodies may struggle to justify maintaining a service not well used, time for acceptance needs to be factored into planning (Stayner and Barclay, 2002)

Want to access services where staff understand the experience of the bush. Telephone services is good for anonminity (Stayner and Barclay, 2002).

Seeking help or leaving the industry is not necessairily part of the mindset(Stayner and Barclay, 2002).

Skills for Service Providers: (Stayner and Barclay 2002)

-Understanding of rural ethos

-bring services to the people

-link with existing credible services (fin counsellors, bush connection etc)

-stable staff (versus high turnover)

-choice is critical to reduce barriers, some feel more comfortable with a stranger outside of their community and social supports, some want someone they know as a professional and as a friend (Stayner and Barclay, 2002)

-women usually begin the process of seeking help (Alston and Kent, 2004)

-older people are more likely to resist seeking help and therefore have a higher risk of social isolation (Alston and Kent, 2004)

-interagency co-operation makes best use of local services and resources (Alston and Kent, 2004)

=

Attitudinal factors (Stayner and Barclay 2002)

-strong attachments to occupation of farming and to rural lifestyle. Merging of occupation with personal identity

-farms are often "family businesses" with intergenerational families, wives/husbands "marrying into" farms

-Strongly adverse to "welfare" or handouts.

-CSO recounts it is not uncommon for farmers to contact cancelling payments as

they have made some money through cattle sales, it's rained, harvested a crop etc.

### Areas of Drought

- Within some areas of Eastern Australia drought has been present since 1991. In 1995 98% of NSW was drought declared (Stayner and Barclay, 2002)
- Farmers make up only 4-17% of rural population in 1996, depending on how you defined rural(Stayner and Barclay, 2002)
- 99.6% of farms are run by farm families (Alston and Kent, 2004)
- 25% decline in number of farms (40 000 farms) in last 25 yrs. Structural adjustment (Alston and Kent, 2004)
- growing differentiation betwn wealthy and poor families, with top 20% of farms doing well in good times (over \$100K) and 25% with incomes below \$10K. When incomes are averaged, farm income in broadacre and dairy (\$27k) is less than average Aust family (\$38k) (Alston and Kent, 2004)
- In the 1970's the Henderson Inquiry into poverty identified that about 10% of farmers were living below the poverty line (Botterill,?)

Economic hardship is a catalyst for high levels of stress-related illnesses, hypertension, psychiatric disorders, depression, diminished life satisfaction, marital discord, alcoholism, suicide risk (Stayner and Barclay, 2002). Affects on children include withdrawal from education, withdrawal from farm, stress related symptoms, becoming "little workers on the farm" , and "acting out....playing up." (Stayner and Barclay, 2002)

Loss of young people-Alston and Kent note (2004, p 94) that the trend for young people to leave the land, and the rural communities pre-dated the drought.

Debt-The breaking of drought will not immediately solve the escalated debt "crisis" for farmers. Some farms have reduced livestock by 50%, let maintenance of machinery slide, lost workers, haven't taken a break from the farm in 2 yrs, and worked extremely long hours to substitute for expensive employees. Rain will not alleviate these issues straight away.

"It is difficult to separate the drought impacts from on-going structural adjustment issues meaning that financial and family stresses may be ongoing and not necessarily relieved by rain." (Alston and Kent, 2004)

### Roles and Domestic Violence:

Wendt and Cheers (2002) undertook a research study interviewing 14 women who have lived in rural communities and experienced domestic violence. Women described their community culture as having "traditional christian influence." Described people in the rural communities as having narrow and fixed lifestyle and belief system. Strong sense of belonging to that community of nuclear family, extended family, friends and work colleagues. Beliefs of

community upheld the traditional nuclear family and well functioning meant everyone working together for the betterment of their family, gender specific roles, church sanctioned marriages and church sanctioned children. Leaving a partner meant that you were a single mother and at risk of being on the “outside.”

Value of persistence is handed down from one generation to the next “putting up with everything....family should stay together regardless.”

Christian values-All bar one women’s experience indicated that the community was dominated by traditional christian values. Some of this was beneficial in providing stabilisation and strength to people, but some was negative through maintaining powerful “cliques in the community and greater emphasis on “public image.” Cliques in the community were often inflexible, rigid and intolerant. Women identified it was not the doctrine or beliefs that maintained the power cliques but the power structures that have developed around religion.

Gossip-Culture was identified as being maintained powerfully through gossip, keeping the normative system in place rewarding “good behaviour” and sanctioning undesirable.

Multiple roles were expected of women: hard labour on the farm, keeping the house, looking after the kids, often doing the books. Women are seen as helpers and support workers for the benefit of the farm and the male farmer. Farming families are structured around males being the dominant partner both within the family and within the farming production.

DV case example:

Lora was in her late 40’s and had lived on the family farm for over 20 years. Her youngest child was 16 yrs and her eldest in their 20’s. Lora left her husband after the last assault, and contacted Centrelink to explore her options for income support. Lora stated that she stayed in the relationship for many years, for many reasons. Initially because the children were young, then she believed the stress and grief of losing his mum made him “lose it,” partly because the farm is all she has known, and because she loved him. Lora experience of assistance was talking with her family GP, who appeared to emphasis with each visit that violence was unacceptable. When she disclosed the violence to friends, her experience was one of practical and emotional support by many. Lora’s name is not on any part of the family farm, or on any other of the family assets.

City like desires for materialism and lifestyle goods are impacting on farming beliefs and values.

Their own beliefs and values, the communities expectations, the community culture were significant impactors on their decisions and actions. Women

identified that they knew if they left the relationship they would be blamed, blackened the family name, isolated, and shunned.

Inheritance of property was also a major contributor to their actions. Family staying together was important so that the farm could be "passed on."

#### Rural Health: Kerby 2002

Kerby noted that in research conducted in 1991,: 'Rural communities are drinking three times the national average and, with significantly more depression, an economic recession and free availability of guns, there have been disturbing increases in suicide'.

-Over the past 20 yrs the rate of male youth suicide has double, and between 1964-1993, constant increases in male suicide rates in almost all rural areas of Australia (Patterson and Peg, 1999)

-In 1990 over a period of 12 months, farmer suicides rose by 67% (in some areas drought had not been a factor ) Cheers, 2001

-Study of over 10 000 Australians identified 27% of 18-24 yr olds had a mental disorder in previous 6 months. Given these rates, access to health and support services, reducing leisure boredom, providing opportunities for building self-esteem and confidence (employment, training, social supports, activity etc) becomes critical. Factors which bush communities struggle to provide (Patterson and Peg, 1999)

#### Bibliography:

Botterill "Government Responses to Farm Poverty: The policy development process", Rural Society, vol 10, Number 1, ??

Wendt and Cheers "Impacts of Rural Culture on Domestic Violence" Rural Social Work, Vol 7, Issue 1, June 2002

Alston and Kent "Social Impacts of Drought-Report to NSW Agriculture" Charles Sturt University, 2004

Stayner and Barclay "Welfare and Support Services for Farm Families" Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation, 2002

Jill Kerby "HOW STRESSED ARE RURAL PEOPLE? "

*HYPERLINK "rursoc.ht"Rural Society 2 (3), 2002*

Patterson and Peg "Nothing to Do" Youth Studies Australia, Vol 18, No 2, 1999

Cheers "Globalisation and Rural Communities" Rural Social Work, Special  
Australian/Canadian Issue, December 2001

