

## Editorials

# Why our farming patients are at an increased risk of taking their own lives this year

### WHY FARMERS?

For most of us, May has brought a welcome respite from the cold and it was a real joy to see the Spring flowers burst into life and watch the swallows swoop overhead after their long journey from Africa. It is now all too easy to put last year's wet summer and the long, cold winter behind us.

Although many will have seen farmers struggling to pull livestock out of the snow and pictures of dead stock on the television during the spring, not all will realise the long-term impact this has on our farming patients.

The current problems are more complex than simply the issue of sheep lost under the snow and will significantly impact on both the physical and mental wellbeing of farmers. The rate of suicide in farmers is twice that of the general population and accounts for 1% of the national toll. Isolated farmers are significantly at risk of suicide and if someone who rarely consults does come into the surgery, research has shown that they may be at particularly high risk<sup>1</sup>.

A study commissioned by the Department of Health<sup>1</sup> looked at the high rate of suicide in farmers, researching why they may have high levels of depression. Unsurprisingly, as farmers are essentially practical people, over 50% had problems with record keeping and understanding forms, regulations, and legislation. One-quarter had financial problems, although most were worried about money and one-third had additional problems with their physical health. The farmers most vulnerable to financial and other problems were those with small farms and mixed farming operations.

### WHY NOW?

The cold, wet summer of 2012 meant that many farmers had less and poorer quality hay and silage for winter feeding than normal; many had to buy in silage as the winter continued into April and their own supplies were exhausted. The lack of grass growth has also caused a doubling in the amount of concentrate fed over winter in comparison to a normal year. Concentrate

is expensive and many farmers are now faced with bills they cannot afford to pay.

Following the wet summer in 2012, fluke was endemic. Drenches are expensive and, even with regular dosing, animals went into winter in a poorer condition than normal. The result was smaller progeny, poorer quality colostrum, and reduced milk production. A ewe which would normally have fed two lambs only fed one; the second died or had to be bottle-fed, incurring extra costs as well as a significant cost in time. Poor colostrum results in weaker lambs, which more readily succumb to infections such as *E. Coli* and orf. The majority of farmers now have far fewer lambs to sell; the feed bills came much sooner.

Dead stock are a problem. Incineration was introduced to deal with the potential threat of persistent prions left in the soil at the time of BSE. Even though research has shown that this is not a real problem, the legislation regarding dead stock removal remains in place. There is nothing more demoralising than having a heap of stinking, rotting carcasses on the yard waiting for collection, sometimes for weeks.

The problems caused by the weather have also affected arable farmers. The wet, cold ground means that planting was delayed, resulting in lower, later output as a result.

Farming is an occupation prone to ups and downs by its very nature and it is often said that farmers are never satisfied. However, things at the moment are genuinely grim in the farming world and I urge all my colleagues to be alert to the needs of their farming patients.

**Bridget Osborne,**  
Sessional GP in North Wales.

**Additional resources**  
Farming help Helpline 0845 3679990

Royal Agricultural Benevolent Fund Confidential  
Helpline 0300 3037373

The Addington Fund 01926 620135

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There is a resource on the Royal College of Psychiatrists' website where pocket-sized leaflets with information on mental health can be ordered via: <https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/PDF/Order%20form%202012.pdf>

The organisation *U Can Cope* has self help resources. *Feeling on the Edge: Helping you get through it* available on the website: <http://www.connectingwithpeople.org/ucancope>

### Provenance

Freely submitted; not externally peer reviewed.

### Competing interests

Bridget Osborne is a part-time sheep and beef farmer who lives at 800ft in North Wales.

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*"... things at the moment are genuinely grim in the farming world."*

### REFERENCE

1. Hawton K, Fagg J, Simkin S, *et al.* Methods used for suicide by farmers in England and Wales: the contribution of availability and its relevance to prevention. *Br J Psychiatry* 1998; **173**: 320–24.