

Low level physical activity and the impact on the fitness of dairy farmers.

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Kellogg Rural Leadership Programme, 2014

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

More New Zealanders are dying of cardiovascular disease than cancer, diabetes and infectious diseases combined. Each month, around 860 people in New Zealand die from cardiovascular disease. Farmers do not compare well with the national population with 83% of farmers who took part in a nationwide farmer wellness and wellbeing programme having a cholesterol reading greater than the World Health Organisation (WHO) acceptable level and are at risk of cardiovascular disease.

Male farmers are most at risk group. 56% of male respondents in the PITSTOP programme had a moderate to high blood pressure and 73% of males had a Body mass index that exceeded the World Health Organisation acceptable healthy level. 61% of respondents were concerned about their ability to keep up with the job. Farming is becoming an unhealthy place to work.

Fitness and exercise play a major part in maintaining body weight, lowering blood pressure and cholesterol which all affect cardiovascular health. Exercise has also been accepted as a green therapy for reducing stress and depression which affect farmers on a huge scale. Health and fitness improves workplace productivity, personal motivation and community involvement. For the dairy industry to meet the objectives of the Strategy for Sustainable Farming, farmers will need to maintain healthy and fit lifestyles and provide opportunity and encouragement to staff in the team environment to maintain the same.

The type of work undertaken by farmers has changed, more sitting down on tractors, quads and at the office desk is contributing to an increase in waist sizes and weight of farmers. The level of activity on dairy farms measured by monitoring farmer heart rates shows farmers working with moderate levels of mechanisation do not elevate heart rates enough to improve fitness and reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease.

Individual heart rate intensity did not vary greatly between fit farmers and unfit farmers proving the manual labour on farms outside calving is not very physical. Fit farmers did achieve more in the day and also managed to do off farm exercise.

More resources need to be put into researching and education around health and physical fitness if the industry wants to attract and retain talented people.