
Unsafe handling of chemicals poses health risk to farming communities

CANBERRA: Australian farmers and their families are being exposed to some of the most dangerous chemicals available, with little training or regulation, a workplace cancer forum was told today (10/12).

Dr Liz Hanna, from the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health at the Australian National University, told the forum hosted by Cancer Council Australia and the ACTU, that her study (2003) of 1050 farming households in north east Victoria found that 95 per cent of households were using agricultural chemicals, yet only 40 per cent of farmers had undertaken a chemicals user course.

“Agricultural chemicals are of particular concern as they interrupt biological pathways that we share with the pests they are designed to kill,” Dr Hanna said. “They are among the most dangerous chemicals we have on the market, yet there is no monitoring in place to encourage safe handling.”

According to Dr Hanna, the level and frequency of chemicals use was extremely high, with 84 per cent of farmers applying chemicals at least weekly during the high season.

Other findings of concern included:

- 70% of farmers worked closely enough to get chemicals on their skin and/or inhale fumes
- 64% sometimes, rarely or never wore protective clothing when applying chemicals
- 86% had spray drift on their skin and clothes from other people using chemicals

Chemicals also got into the water supply via spray drifting on to roofs with water tanks, or seeping into aquifers supplying bore water.

Dr Hanna said there was minimal regulation of agricultural chemicals use in Australia because they were used on farms instead of factories. Occupational health and safety regulations existed for large farms employing staff, however 95 per cent of farms in Australia were family owned and operated.

“The truth is we don’t know the extent of the health problems resulting from these exposures, however clearly farmers and their families are at high risk,” she said.

“Farmers are not going to stop using chemicals, so we need to make their usage as safe as possible. That means ensuring the safest chemicals are available, that guidelines are set and safe chemicals handling is always applied.”

Chair of Cancer Council Australia’s Occupational and Environmental Cancer Committee, Terry Slevin, said that not enough attention had been paid to the issue and the farming community deserved better. “We need to make sure all farmers are trained in safe handling practices and that there is credible and frequent monitoring to ensure the health of farmers and their families.”

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