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Injury prevention in Farmers Occupational Health Services (FOHS) in Finland

General

The incidence of occupational diseases and injuries in agriculture is high in Finland. The compensation rate has recently decreased slightly. Injuries in agriculture are more severe than in all industries on average. The relative hazardousness of various agricultural tasks on dairy farms has been previously studied, and the expected injury cost indexes on Finnish farms have been defined.

In Finland, occupational health services (OHS) are part of the public health care system. The Occupational Health Care Act (2001) came into force in 1979 and was updated in 2001. The objective of OHS is to ensure a healthy and safe work environment and to promote employee health and work ability. According to the law, an employer is responsible for arranging these preventive services for all employees, but for farmers and other self-employed individuals, joining OHS is voluntary. In addition to preventive services, farmers can also sign up for curative services. Farmers' Occupational Health Services (FOHS) are subsidized from tax revenues which mean that the annual cost per farmer is profitable. FOHS are mostly arranged in municipal health care centres. In 2007, more than half of all full-time farmers were covered by FOHS.

The primary aims of the Finnish FOHS are to reduce the incidence of work-related diseases and occupational accidents, and to promote work ability. The protocol for FOHS includes 1) checking working conditions, 2) health checks 3) feedback for the farmer (recommendations on the use of personal protectors, on changes in work habits and improvements in working conditions), and 4) activities to promote work ability.

Good Occupational Health Practice

A recommendation for the implementation of the Good Occupational Health Practice (GOHP) in FOHS was published in 2000 and updated in 2007. According to this, an occupational health nurse and a local agricultural advisor, occasionally accompanied by an occupational health physician and/or a physiotherapist, should visit their client's farm to survey their working conditions every four years. Assessment of working conditions on farms should, when possible be completed using occupational hygiene measurements. The occupational health nurse of the OH unit can then carry out a health check, and will refer the case to the occupational health physician if needed. It is essential that OH personnel have sufficient resources and that their skills are regularly updated through training. The interaction between the farmer/farm and the OH unit providing FOHS is a continuous process (Figure 1).

Injury prevention

In farming injury prevention takes place through promoting technical safety, safe working habits, and a safety culture, in order to avoid accidents. During the farm walkthrough, the FOHS team assess accident risks for both adult and minors. The safety of the work environment covers the daily routes both outside and inside buildings, scaffolding and ladders, protection against falling, machinery and equipment, the handling of animals, electricity and lightning, chemicals, order and waste disposal. The need for protective equipment and necessary first aid readiness are assessed. During the working conditions survey, the observable hazards and problems are discussed with the farmer. After the survey the farmer is informed, also in written feedback form, of the hazards found in the work. Detailed recommendations are given for avoiding the hazards through the use of personal protectors, changes in working methods, or renovation of machinery and buildings. An agricultural advisor should always be consulted in this stage.



Figure 1. FOHS protocol

Future challenges

Social security and occupational health and safety activities are of a high level in Finland. FOHS has been developing for 30 years. Study results and Farmers Accident Insurance Data (Farmers' Social Insurance Institution) are easily available. We have a solid base for safe work, improving working conditions, supporting the maintenance of work ability, and the opportunity to retire while still in good health. However occupational accident and disease rates are still too high.

How can we develop FOHS, and farm walkthroughs in particular, so that farmers would be more active in improving their working conditions and changing their safety culture? Safety management practices should be implemented more commonly on farms, and farm walkthroughs should focus on the needs of the farmer. How can we gain more resources for FOHS personnel and regularly update their training?

Conclusions

Occupational disease, accident statistics and the results of epidemiological studies show that FOHS has had a positive impact on farmers' work-related health behaviour and work safety. The transition to the European Union has been stressful for most Finnish farmers, thus activities to maintain workability are especially important. The development of OHS for Finnish farmers is a model of how to organize OHS in a particularly hazardous occupation. The interaction between the farmer/farm and the OH unit providing FOHS is a continuous process. It is essential that OH personnel have sufficient resources and that their skills are regularly updated through training. Continuous development of the services is crucial.