Interviews with Widows Following Fatal Farming Incidents

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Abstract

Farm families have been identified traditionally with a strong family bond resulting from both living and working together. When a farming fatality occurs, surviving family members are left to deal with not only the tragedy of losing a loved one, but also the loss of a coworker. Although every family experiencing a loss will deal with bereavement issues, farm families are faced with additional challenges that differentiate them from other family situations. A qualitative research methodology was employed to understand the complex mix of challenges facing farm families after the death of a family member. Semi–structured interviews were conducted with farming widows in Kentucky to explore the stresses and challenges related to the farm business, family relationships, and the mental health of the individual members. Becoming the primary decision maker for the farm and household was a difficult role for the widows. Economic issues were an underlying consideration in many aspects of the experiences and changes they encountered. The need to make economic decisions almost immediately while continuing the necessary chores to maintain crops and livestock was very stressful and left little time for bereavement. Often the support from family, friends, and neighbors went beyond emotional comforting to providing help with farm chores and guidance on financial decisions. In developing resources for farm families in similar circumstances, it is important to understand how intertwined their lives are with their environment and the economics of the business.

Keywords. **Agriculture, Rural health, Bereavement, Coping, Support system.**

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Although every family experiencing the death of a loved one will deal with bereavement issues, farm families are faced with additional challenges that differentiate them from many other family situations (Rosenblatt et al., 1978; Rosenblatt and Anderson, 1981; Rosenblatt and Karis, 1994). These challenges may include living and working where the death occurred, continual exposure to a hazardous work environment, and minimal time away from work to attend to the personal needs of grieving. A literature review revealed few qualitative studies of farm families' experiences after the loss of a family member. Rosenblatt and Karis (1993, 1994) interviewed families in which a fatality had occurred to better understand how the members were affected interpersonally and economically. These studies of farming families and rural communities provide a basis for the themes presented here.

One of the primary ways in which farm families differ from most families is in the intertwining of work with everyday life (Rosenblatt and Karis, 1993). Work and related economic decisions facing farm families as a result of a death may include selling land or equipment, replacing the deceased worker, managing the tasks of the farm operation, and addressing changes in the intergenerational transfer of the farm. Many factors need to be considered when changing the farm operation, and making decisions can be stressful even under normal circumstances (Rosenblatt and Anderson, 1981). For instance, if the deceased was the primary farm operator, decisions about farm management are left to others in the family who may not have the same expertise. Because of the demanding nature of their work, farm families are not able to take much, if any, time off to deal with issues after a death in the family. To maintain income, animals need to be fed, dairy herds need to be milked, and crops must be planted, tended, and harvested. In addition, it may be difficult for families to find appropriate and affordable resources in rural areas to deal with legal issues and mental health needs (Rosenblatt and Karis, 1993; NIMH, 2000).

The unique set of challenges confronting a farm family after the death of a family member may contribute to serious consequences for the farm and family. This study explored the complex issues confronting farm families through personal interviews with widows in Kentucky whose husbands were killed in farm–related incidents. Interviews focused on the stresses and resulting challenges related to the farm business, family relationships, and the mental health of the individual members.

Methods

To understand the complex mix of challenges facing farm families upon the death of a family member and the ways the issues were confronted, a qualitative research methodology using a semi–structured interview format was employed.

Families who had experienced a farm–related death were identified through the Kentucky Fatality Assessment and Control Evaluation (FACE) Project, a statewide surveillance system for occupational fatalities with a component for on–site investigations of selected cases. Eligible candidates for interviews were families in which the death had occurred between one and five years (1994–1998) prior to the interview. The selection process began with a review of the farming–related deaths investigated as part of FACE because these cases included information about the deceased, their family structure, the farm operation, and how the incident occurred. Potential interviewees were narrowed to immediate family for whom we could obtain

a current address and telephone number. The interviews were open to any immediate family members who wished to participate.

After obtaining approval from the institutional review board, letters were mailed to 23 eligible candidates to inform them of the study. Two weeks later, follow–up phone calls were made to invite them to participate and schedule interviews. Nine candidates agreed to participate in the study, seven of whom were widows. Of the remaining candidates, six declined to participate, two could not be reached by phone, and in six cases either the address or phone number was incorrect. Although other family members were invited to participate in the interviews, only one session included a second person. The analysis presented here includes only the interviews with widows.

A "processual consent" procedure was used (Rosenblatt, 1995), meaning that candidates were provided with several opportunities to agree or decline to participate in the project. All participants signed a consent form, but they could decline to answer any question or stop the interview at any time. Sessions were conducted in respondents' homes by one or both authors and varied in length from 25 to 90 minutes. A semi–structured interview guide was used to gather information about the farm, family, fatal incident, and post–incident experiences, focusing on the social and economic consequences of the fatality. Interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed.

A literature review was conducted which focused on farm families and their interaction with each other and their work as well as their experiences following a fatality (Rosenblatt et al., 1978; Rosenblatt and Anderson, 1981; Rosenblatt and Karis, 1993, 1994). In addition, literature related to the death of a spouse, bereavement, and rural women was reviewed to gain a broader perspective of these issues (Clayton, 1990; Curry and Stone, 1992; Rosenblatt, 1993a, 1993b; Shenk, 1998). Broad themes were developed from the interview guide which related to the information and experiences we sought to better understand. The previous literature served to identify and support the themes and ideas that emerged as the interview transcripts and field notes were thoroughly reviewed by both authors.

Thematic coding was used to analyze the interview data (Aronson, 1994; Mason, 1996; QSR, 1997a). NUD*IST software, specifically designed for qualitative research (QSR, 1997b), was used to store the transcripts and organize patterns of dialogue into meaningful themes and groups. By coding the data into groups using NUD*IST, we were able to explore the broad themes as well as identify additional themes that were previously unrecognized or ideas which emerged during the interviews that were unexpected. The themes and the patterns among them were explored in depth to better understand the experience of each widow as well as how her experience related to that of others. This analysis was compared to the themes and ideas discussed in other studies to identify commonalties and differences.

For the purpose of this article, names have been omitted and brackets "[ ]" are used to indicate when dialogue has been paraphrased for clarification or to alter identifying information. Ellipses inside brackets "[. . .]" are used to indicate that numerous lines of dialogue were omitted between sentences.

Results

For all seven widows who participated, the fatal incident had occurred 3–5 years prior to the interview. All of the deceased were white males, and their ages ranged

from 45 to 75. The widows' ages at the time of interview ranged from 47 to 77. All had children, most of whom lived nearby and helped with farm work during busy times.

At the time of the fatal incident, three of the decedents were farming full–time, one had a full–time job off the farm in addition to the farm work, and three were farming part–time although they considered themselves retired. All of the widows were involved in the farm operation; two worked off–farm jobs in addition to assisting with the farm, and one worked full–time on the farm. Commodities varied among the participants and included tobacco, hay, cattle, and hogs. All of the fatalities involved farm equipment and occurred while the husband was working alone. Incidents included four tractor overturns, two tractor runovers, and one auger entanglement on top of a grain bin. In three cases, the husband's body was discovered by the surviving widow.

Results are presented by the major themes and issues regarding the death and the farm operation: economics and decision making, stress, maintaining the farm, reminders of deceased, increased awareness of farm safety, grief, comfort and support, and coping.

Economics and Decision Making

Following the death, the widows were faced with critical economic decisions about how to continue the farm work and maintain income. Prior arrangements had not been made concerning how the farm work and property would be handled, thus these issues were left to the widows and other close family members.

None of the participants lost their farm or home due to financial difficulties, but they were forced to make decisions and changes concerning farm operations. Some widows increased their hours spent engaged in farm work, reduced farm acreage, leased out their land, or reduced the number of livestock. However, they did not mention money as the reason for making changes; rather, decisions were based on balancing the amount of work that was required with what was practical for them and their immediate family members.

I sold one of the farms because I couldn't move the cattle back and forth to the other farm and everything. I could, I guess, but working full–time [at another job], I felt like I needed the cattle here so I could check on them and see to them. And it was a problem getting hay moved from over there and I just didn't want to have to depend on my neighbors for the rest of my life or something. . . . you just don't want to take advantage of good neighbors. . . . Age 60

So we just gave up the tobacco. And we had cattle, just had to give them up too because I couldn't do the things that I had been doing. Age 67

[We kept] just the pigs and cows. I felt that was two things that if my sons–in–law help me and my sons help, that I could get along with this. Age 47

One widow continued to farm and hold a full–time teaching job to support three of her five daughters who were still at home. She was heavily involved in working on the farm with her husband, and after the death she took on all the duties herself. Her feelings were ambivalent about this role, as she related that she loved farming, but at the same time equated it with a financial obligation to her family. She felt that hiring help was not an option because it would have decreased the extra income that she was putting toward her daughters' education.

[My husband] would not have wanted me to live here and [the farm] to be a burden the rest of my life. It's not a burden now but like I said, I'm 50. You take five years from now, I don't know if I could physically continue doing what I'm doing. I don't know

that I want to really. I'm doing it now because I see the need financially to get [one daughter] out of college and [another daughter] in. [. . .] I've already told [my daughters]. . . I said, I can't continue to do this the rest of my life. When you girls get out of high school, when you get out of college and I have no more need for the cows or tobacco crop, I'm going to sell this farm. Age 50

Becoming the primary decision–maker was a major change and one that was very difficult. The women were used to working with their spouses as a team to make decisions about the farm and household, but the loss forced them to take on roles that were sometimes overwhelming.

The hardest thing I ever had to do was to face the fact that I was the one making the decisions, that I had to say what had to be done and what needed to be done. Age 60

I think the thing that maybe has been the hardest for me is. . .making decisions. . . . for over 50 years you've had someone to talk things over with and now you have to make a decision by yourself. Age 77

The widows turned to family members and close friends for advice about the farm and finances, but sometimes felt that it was difficult to know whom to trust. Although they admitted needing help making decisions, they found it frustrating and stressful to receive unsolicited advice.

I didn't know what direction to go in and everybody was trying to tell me, you need to do this and you need to do that, especially my mom. Age 50

Participants were asked if any major changes were made in their family structure to ensure the continuation of the farm. Only temporary changes were made for a few of the families. In nearly every case, the widow had adult children or other extended family members who lived nearby and helped with the farm work during busy seasons. After the death, these family members provided more assistance than usual, but there were no changes in living arrangements for more than a couple months. In addition, no one reported difficulties or arguments with other family members over selling all or part of the farm. One widow related that her 16–year–old son played a much larger role in the operation of the farm after the death of his father. She appreciated his help and was proud of his developing responsibility and maturity, but she was concerned that he was spending too much time working and not enough time with his friends as he had in the past.

Stress

Before their husbands' deaths, all of the women contributed to operating the farm, some participating in tasks alongside their husbands. The new responsibility of becoming the primary farm operator and decision maker was indeed stressful. All the widows were put in the position of deciding how much of the farming they could realistically continue. They talked about their worries and fears of making poor decisions related to economics and management of the farm work. Their emotional responses to stress such as crying, anxiety, and insomnia, which are common during bereavement (Clayton, 1990), were often linked to or increased by their responsibilities with the farm. As time passed, the widows accepted their limitations and imperfections as they adjusted to their new roles as principal farm operators.

I think I didn't want to make a mistake. And [my brother–in–law] said, people make mistakes. Then it hit me, I don't have to be right all the time. [. . .] The sleep and worry of the farm was, I guess, some of my big issues, because some nights I'd get three or four hours of sleep and get up and go again. [. . .] [My husband] was a good manager, which I don't know how good I am. And in the beginning, when he died . . . I always

wondered why I didn't die first, because I thought he could go on so much better than me and he knew the business part of the farm and he could do all those things and I couldn't. And that was hard for me to accept. Age 47

Yeah, I guess I would say I depended on [my husband] for a lot of things and now I guess I depend on God for a lot of it, if that makes sense. I'm always saying, God, just don't let me mess up, let me be able to do this. But I guess nobody's perfect about everything and I'm sure I messed up a lot along the way. Age 60

Maintaining the Farm

Three women felt an initial need to maintain the farm in honor of their husbands and were hesitant to make changes after the death. The farm was a connection of home, family, work, and income, which provided livelihood, purpose, common goals, and sense of self. Maintaining the farm seemed to be a way of continuing those connections and remaining loyal to their husbands. In some cases, the farmland had been in the family for many years, further increasing a sense of loyalty and purpose in continuing the farm to pass to other generations.

I think [my husband] would have faulted me if I would have just quit. But I think if I tried and I failed, he would say, well you done as good as you can do and that's all you can do. And that's one of the reasons I tried to hang on to everything I had and did it that way, because. . .I just couldn't do that to [my husband]. Even though he's dead, I just can't do it to him. Age 47

Because it's so important to keep [the farm] going. And I really don't think I was doing it for [my husband]. The kids said I was. They kept saying, Mom, you're just doing this because it is Daddy's dream. But I really don't think that I was. Maybe at first I was, but I'm not now. Age 50

Well, I hope I made a wise decision [selling some land]. I haven't been sorry of it yet. . .[but if my husband] had been still living that would have been the last thing he would have done because he didn't want to sell any of his land. That was something really special to him and he didn't want to sell any of his land. But it was just the fact that I couldn't take care of it. And I talked about it with [my daughters]. We've been in this thing 100 percent together. They said, Mama, go ahead and sell it. . . . Age 60

Reminders of Deceased

Non–farm families usually have one location for their home and another for their job, which allows for separation between their work roles and family life, but these lines are blurred for farm families. As a result, for those that have lost a family member on the farm, the reminder of the loved one is constantly there during both work and leisure time (Rosenblatt, 1993a, 1993b; Rosenblatt and Karis, 1993). For several of the widows and other family members, it was very difficult to continue life where the death occurred and/or use the same equipment that was involved in the fatality. In some cases, the equipment was sold or replaced because of the painful memories attached.

. . .couldn't use the bushhog again, it just sits there. We had to buy another bushhog. [. . .] . . .we had to get a new [tractor] wheel which I think [my son] was relieved of because they thought that was the one that ran over his daddy. . . . Age 67

There's a grain bin that [my husband] was on top of that he got choked on. Well, it's right there and you have to pass it every day and it was a major thing to go through that. And I think I'll always associate the bin with [my husband] dying. [. . .] I have

to go everyday to the barn where we worked. I mean, I can't dissociate myself from work, where he worked, because that's where I work. Age 47

. . .[my daughter] doesn't want the tractor he got killed on. I had to bring it back [after being repaired] because everything I owned I operated with it. Age 50

Conversely, for one widow the farmland where she and her husband worked together offered a sense of comfort and a way of coping with his death.

When [my husband] first got killed I would get up early, early in the morning, and because he loved the land so much, I would just walk over the land. And I guess for me that was a way of kind of feeling closer to him and thinking of the things that we did. Age 60

Three of the women described feeling anxious or having flashbacks when they saw someone, even a total stranger, involved in a task that reminded them of their husband's fatal incident.

I went to a [farm] safety program. . .[where they showed a film] and the very first thing that came on was this guy lifting up a roll of hay on the front and the machine evidently was broke and when it came back it crushed him. . . . I left. I couldn't handle it. I just could not handle it. I thought I could, but I couldn't. Age 50

[While driving in the car] we saw this guy bushhogging on the bank of a pond. . . . It scared me to death. . . . it just looked like that tractor was barely staying on there and that thing was going to turn over and squash him in that pond. . . . [. . .] [When I was passing our field not long after my husband's death], I saw our bushhog and tractor and the tractor was running and I saw my son's straw hat between the wheels. . . . he had knelt down to check the tire and I couldn't see him. All I could see was the hat. And I started screaming. . . . Age 67

Increased Awareness of Farm Safety

The fatal incident affected the families' feelings toward safety on the farm. Several mentioned increased concern for their own safety as well as for others working on the farm. A few felt the need to supervise or frequently check on a family member involved in a potentially hazardous farm task.

There are times that I'm. . .completely exhausted, so I don't get on the equipment at all. I do not get on it. I don't take that chance because I'm the only thing my kids have left, so to speak. Age 50

. . .[we're] much more careful, don't take anything for granted anymore especially the farm equipment. We'd always been careful, but now it's just—it's just a known fact, we know what it can do. . . . Age 67

I still have to watch [my granddaughter] even though it's been this long. . . .she disked my garden for me in the spring. . . . I still have to go watch her. Age 67

Grief

A normal stage of bereavement is an initial feeling of numbness or disbelief in which the person "functions automatically" (Clayton, 1990). This helps to serve as a defense against the intense emotional anguish (Curry and Stone, 1992). Several of the widows reported feeling in a dazed or numb state after the death and remembered little about that time. Unfortunately, they were unable to take time away from the farm to deal with their feelings of grief. The responsibilities of the farm remained unchanged: livestock and crops needed to be tended or the family risked financial loss.

I probably did some stupid stuff the first six months after he died. I mean, I probably did, but I don't remember what I did. I mean, I remember getting on the equipment, I remember going out. . . . I know I took care of everything and I know I took care of the kids and I know I was working. But it's a memory and I blocked it out for whatever reason, but I don't want to go back to it. [. . .] I cried a lot. I cursed him quite a bit for leaving me with the kids and the farm and not teaching me all that I needed to know about what would get dumped on me. Age 50

Comfort and Support

All of the participants spoke a great deal about the strong support and comfort they received following the fatal incident. The sources of support mentioned most often were family, friends, neighbors, church, and general community. These are likely similar for any family that experiences loss. However, unlike most other families, the extent of the support provided to farm families often includes help with the family enterprise (Rosenblatt and Karis, 1993; Reed, 1996). The widows we interviewed received not only emotional support, but also help with the necessary farm work and advice on economic issues.

I had the kids and the neighbors and the church and my family, some brothers and sisters, and they were all there for me. So, I was pretty lucky in that respect. Age 65

My church family, my neighbors, they all started flocking in. [. . .] I guess I became kind of a community project when the accident happened, because so many people helped me. Age 60

Two of the widows described extensive help from neighbors and community members at critical times in the farming season in the initial period after the death.

The neighbors all come in and cut my hay and put it up, got it up for me that fall after he was killed. They helped me with the livestock. If I needed calves moved or if I needed to take some to market, they would come in and help. Age 60

[The tobacco] was ready to cut. . . .We had set aside $2000 to cut that tobacco. And the next week [members of the community] had put a sign up on the billboard [in the town square] that they were going to cut it. And there was over a hundred that came and cut the tobacco and housed it. That saved me $2000. They came from all over...and the ladies brought food and fed them. That was very helpful and you don't know how much I appreciated that. Age 77

Coping

In addition to the support system of friends and family, every widow said it helped to "stay busy" as they tried to cope with the loss and stress. Activities they felt were helpful included reading, keeping a journal, quilting, writing a book, exercising, traveling, learning to dance, watching television, and helping others. The purpose of some activities was to "keep your mind occupied" while others served to increase their socialization. Although the farm was a source of stress, for two of the women the routine of the work was a way of coping.

Even though it was difficult, it was really my refuge. It was my way of having something to do because I really don't believe that I emotionally could have made it as well as I did it if hadn't been for that farm. Age 50

Although all the women indicated they had a strong support system, a few experienced times when they wanted to talk about the deceased or grief issues but family or friends seemed uncomfortable with those subjects. In some instances, a

widow felt it was best not to show emotion through talking or crying to avoid making another person uncomfortable or placing a burden on them.

Well, at times I have felt the need to talk about it and people avoid talking about it. My friends and my family, they don't think that I want to talk about it. [. . .] [A long–time friend stopped by] and he offered condolences. And I thought he was going to ask me some questions but I saw right away that he was not. It made him uncomfortable to talk about it because he thought that I would be uncomfortable talking about it so I didn't say anything. Age 77

If you sit around and grieve all the time, crying and all, it makes it hard on the rest of the family. Age 65

I went out to the barn and cried a lot so [my son] wouldn't see. Age 47

Even when residents of rural communities are in need of professional assistance, the cost and time may prohibit some from using mental health services. Only one of the women sought help from a professional therapist and was treated with an antidepressant medication. She said both were very helpful for her, and she wished she would have sought treatment earlier because "in retrospect I suffered a year and a half and I didn't have to." On the other hand, one woman attended a grief therapy group with her adult daughter, but after the first session they felt it would not be helpful and did not return. Another woman felt counseling services would not have been beneficial to her, saying "I had to resolve things my way." Although she wanted her children to attend counseling, they refused and there were frequent "battles" over this issue. The remainder of the widows relied on their existing support system and did not seek any outside services.

Advice

We asked the widows if they had any advice that might help farm families in a similar situation. Their responses were not particularly related to farming but rather were more general statements from their experiences of dealing with loss. Four of the women felt that it was best to keep busy and mentioned spending time with others, learning a new activity, and traveling as helpful. Two strongly advised waiting at least six months to a year to make any major decisions or life changes. Other words of advice included taking one day at a time and sharing feelings with a trusted friend or family member.

Discussion

Farming is hazardous and stressful work. Tasks are time consuming and labor intensive, crops are weather dependent, and income can fluctuate by season and year. These usual stresses of farming life are greatly increased with the sudden death of the primary farm operator. While the widows in our study dealt with grief in differing ways, they experienced similar changes in many facets of their lives, including personal, family, and business.

On a personal level, the widows discussed experiences and feelings related to the loss of their husbands, who were their partners in marriage as well as business. They described the challenges in becoming the primary decision maker, a role which they were accustomed to sharing with their husband. Decisions about the farm operation and the need to maintain crops and livestock were paramount. In addition, because work and home life are usually in the same place for farm families, the widows had to cope with reminders of their husbands whether they were taking care of farm work

or spending leisure time in their home, a common theme in other studies of farm families (Rosenblatt and Karis, 1993; Rosenblatt 1993a). Farming–related issues were often a source of stress and anxiety as the widows struggled with fears of making mistakes and keeping up with necessary farm tasks to ensure income while continuing responsibilities related to non–farm jobs, other family members, and maintaining the household.

In the business aspect of their lives, the widows were forced to make changes in the family enterprise such as selling land and equipment, reducing or eliminating commodities, and handling chores previously performed by their husbands. In some cases, it was a difficult decision to make changes that affected the business their spouse had worked over many years to build. While some of these issues might be faced by surviving spouses of individuals in some non–farm occupations (e.g., other small family–run businesses), the necessity for maintaining daily operations and the urgency and volume of decisions that our respondents described may be special burdens for survivors of family farm owners.

All of the widows were extremely grateful for the outpouring of support they received from family, friends, church, and community. As found in other studies of farm families (Rosenblatt and Karis, 1993; Reed, 1996), the support went beyond emotional comforting to providing help with farm chores and guidance on economic issues and financial decisions. However, a few respondents in our study indicated that at times they felt overwhelmed by excessive or intrusive advice and offers of help.

In many aspects of their experience, economic issues were an underlying consideration. Decisions about farm work were based on how much the widow could manage on her own or with help from immediate family, rather than hiring workers to maintain the previous workload. The widows had little time for bereavement when much of their time and attention was directed toward necessary chores and making decisions about the economic issues of the farm. In some cases, the necessity of working on the farm to maintain economic stability provided a routine that helped them cope with their loss. Even though these were very difficult times, none of women in our study changed residence or sold their farm completely. This was slightly different from Rosenblatt and Karis (1993), who found that four of the eight widows they interviewed liquidated their farms almost immediately after the death of their husbands. This difference is addressed in our limitations as well.

Studies have shown that rural women are quite independent and view formal services as an option only when their informal support system is not enough (Shenk, 1998). It is possible that mental health services such as counseling or support groups may be inadequate in rural areas or that there is little awareness of the availability and benefits of formal services (Rosenblatt and Karis, 1993; NIMH, 2000). In addition, services may be too generic to meet the needs of a farming family or too far away to be convenient (Rosenblatt and Karis, 1993; NIMH, 2000). In this study, the widows exhibited a strong sense of independence, and all but one relied only on their informal support system. One widow sought professional treatment for her depression and found it very helpful; however, another dropped a therapy group after one session because she had difficulty identifying with the others in the group. Even though the widows relied heavily on family and friends, several said that at times they wanted to talk about their feelings but others seemed uncomfortable engaging in a conversation related to the deceased person. A few of the widows also admitted that they avoided discussing their feelings or showing strong emotions because they did not want others to feel uncomfortable or burdened. Although family is often a main source of support, family members may also become more distant because of a death in the family (Rosenblatt and Karis, 1994). With a shared loss, there is potential for

conflict, disagreement, and resentment related to decision making, meeting the needs of the other, and differences in grieving and communicating. Because some of the widows' needs were not met by family and friends, they may have indeed benefited from formal services that provided support and counseling in an unbiased setting.

In analyzing this qualitative data and considering the interpretations, it is important to point out some limitations of our study. One limitation to bear in mind is that we were restricted to interviewing families that could be contacted by mail and phone. It is likely that families for whom we were unable to obtain a current address and phone number had changed residence. We do not know if the move was a consequence of the fatality and difficulties with the farm. Some families we contacted declined to participate because they felt they had dealt with their loss and did not want to discuss those issues again. There may be differences between those who participated and those who did not. For example, coping skills and social support may have differed in ways that influenced decisions to participate. In addition, because our initial data set included only fatal occupational injuries, we do not know the experiences of farming families whose primary operator was killed while involved in activities other than work or died as a result of a long illness. Future research comparing these experiences may be of benefit. Another limitation to consider in our study is that the interviews took place 3–5 years after the death, so recollection of some details may have been lost; however, it is likely the widows remembered and discussed what they felt was most important during those years. Despite the limitations, the interviews provided valuable insight into the experiences of these farming widows and families.

Conclusions

Mental health professionals, medical personnel, agri–business leaders, and others in a position to assist farm families should be aware of the issues widows face after the death of their husbands as the primary operator. Access to and availability of mental health care is lacking in rural areas, which are further hindered by issues such as poverty, geographic isolation, and cultural differences (NIMH, 2000). Concerted efforts should be made by professionals and organizations in rural communities to make help accessible, affordable, and appropriate for their farming community. The needs of farm families, and widows in particular, include not only the usual mental health care needs, but a thorough understanding of how intertwined their lives are with their farm and the economics of the business. This information can be used in developing appropriate resources for families in similar circumstances.

A variety of professional disciplines should be trained to provide assistance to farming families or at least recognize when a family member is in need of services and where help can be obtained. For instance, professionals in a position to offer help to a family immediately after a death would likely include medical personnel, coroners, clergy, and funeral directors.

Agricultural extension offices are in touch with the needs of their farm community and as such may be a suitable avenue for development and dissemination of information and available resources. Materials could include both prevention and post–event information such as farm safety and injury prevention, farm and money management, local support groups, and mental health services. Materials focused on post–event needs may be sent directly to a widow or other family members to acknowledge their loss and offer assistance without being overbearing or disrespect-

ful of their privacy or independence. Other agricultural health and safety organizations and commodity groups could provide assistance by disseminating information via mailings or though providing on–line materials and links to other resources.

As it becomes more common for households to have Internet access, building an on–line support network would be a practical avenue for reaching many farm families. This network may take the form of providing links to farm families who have experienced a fatality so that support and advice can be obtained directly or by providing links to professional services, or a combination of both methods of support. Services could be developed to target specific groups such as widows and their needs as described in this paper or generalized to all farm family members, or focused on a geographical area such as a state or an area of the country. One example of a successful on–line support network is SHAUN (Sharing Help Awareness United Network), which provides peer support and professional counseling to farmers, farm workers, and their families who experience death or disability (SHAUN, 2001). SHAUN is based in Iowa and focuses on serving residents of that state.

Results of the analysis presented here make it clear that early estate planning is essential for farming families. Planning how the farm should be handled in the event of a death would make decision making an easier process for all family members. Even though these issues are difficult to discuss, the family members involved would gain a better understanding of the farm operation and the wishes of the primary operator, thus alleviating some of the uncertainty, frustration, and guilt of those who are left to make decisions.

In addition, it may be useful to those conducting farm safety programs to educate farm workers about the economic consequences that a fatality or serious injury can have on their farm and surviving family members. By showing the cost effectiveness of safe behavior — such as the cost of retrofitting a tractor with a rollover protective structure and seatbelt compared to the cost of a fatality — a farm family will be empowered to make prudent economic decisions that may help avoid a serious injury or death on the farm.

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