

Student Spotlight

Adapting Care to Culture: Aging in Agriculture

Anna Eastman, BSN Student
University of Kentucky, College of Nursing
Mentor: Dr. Deborah Reed – Good Samaritan
Endowed Chair in Community Health Nursing

Kentucky is home to over 76,400 farms (Census of Agriculture, 2014). According to the National Agricultural Statistics Service, the average age of a farmer in Kentucky is 57.6. This is a reflection of the nation's increasing age of farm operators, which has followed a 30-year-long steady increase. With an increasing age in an occupation that not only serves as a means of income but as a lifestyle, the aging farm population has specific needs when it comes to health care. Acknowledgement of certain aspects of the agricultural lifestyle can help nurses provide culturally competent care.

Why does this population require attention?

The cultural characteristics of agriculture define this population's way of life. Usually, farmers reside on family farms that have been lived on and worked on by multiple generations of the same family. The farm not only serves as a workplace but also a home, which makes its upkeep the number one priority for these farmers. It is not uncommon for farmers to work well past the age of retirement because of their commitment to their farm. For these farmers, health is the ability to work and they will choose to work until they are physically not able to perform their farm tasks anymore (Reed, Ravens, Conley, Westneat, & Adkins, 2012). According to a survey that gathered information about determinants of work hours on farmers ages 50 and up in Kentucky and South Carolina, chronic health problems only had a minor role in determining the amount of hours worked (Marcum, 2011a).

Taking part in physical labor on a daily basis defines the work of agriculture and it is not surprising that farmers, ranchers, and other agricultural managers were included in the top 10 deadliest jobs based on data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (Forbes, 2013). Farm work routinely involves heavy lifting, climbing, working with animals, and working with heavy machinery. Farm work is dangerous, regardless of the age of the farmer, and health problems that typically accompany aging can exacerbate the risk that this job carries. The human body may become less capable to handle the same workload as it ages, even though the work that a farm requires will remain the same.

Common health problems for older farmers include chronic bronchitis, emphysema, arthritis and restless nights. From a study that evaluated farm-work related injury of farmers age 50 and over in Kentucky and South Carolina, it was calculated that those who experienced 5 to 7 restless nights per week, operated machinery on a highway, or climbed 8 feet or higher were at significantly higher odds of sustaining a farm-related injury (Marcum, 2011b). Other health problems, such as musculoskeletal disorders and arthritis, can limit the amount of physical labor a farmer can perform. Moreover, hearing and visual deficits also place the older farmers at risk. If they are not able to hear or see potential danger, they may not be able to respond appropriately and avoid injury.

Currently, there is limited research that focuses on the specific educational and health care needs of the aging farmer population. However, nurses can use the information that is currently available and increase the culturally appropriate care.

What can nurses do?

Nurses can use the knowledge of the risks this occupation faces, the physical limitations of aging, and farmer's commitment to farm work to tailor the older farmer's care. Nurses can apply this knowledge to the education they may provide to older clients who are still working on their farms. Nurses should provide education about preventive measures older farmers can take to protect themselves in the field.

Lifestyle tips such as stretching before work, good sleep hygiene, taking frequent water breaks, using good body mechanics, and proper communication (International Society for Agricultural Safety and Health, 2014) while at work may help older farmers avoid injury. Stretching before physical labor may help reduce the incidence of activity-based injuries. Good sleep hygiene can help ensure that aging farmers are alert when they start their day so they can operate machinery to the best of their ability. Frequent water breaks can prevent dehydration, especially when the farmer is working in hot conditions. These breaks may provide relief from labor intensity, thereby reducing physical and psychological stress. Good body mechanics may help prevent unnecessary strain on the worker's back when lifting. Finally, having a means of communication when out alone in the field can

help the farmer call for help if necessary. If nurses make farmers aware of the small changes they can make to avoid injury, their work can become safer and healthier.

Preventive measures in addition to education can help make farming even safer for elderly farmers who continue to work. An up to date tetanus immunization can help protect the farmer against this deadly disease if a laceration or other injury occurs on the job, since it is likely that the wound will be dirty. Hearing and vision screenings can identify deficits so measures can be taken to accommodate those deficiencies. Additionally, wide brim hats and sunscreen can help protect against the sun's harmful rays while farmers are working outside (International Society for Agricultural Safety and Health, 2014).

Conclusion

As a nurse it is important to be aware of the needs of the populations you work with, and nurses in Kentucky should be aware of the special needs and the culture of farmers who require health care services. Farmers tend to work until failing health or serious injury forces them to stop. When nurses understand the farming culture, and have knowledge of the available research and resources, nurses can more successfully identify health risks for these clients and provide better, more focused, culturally attentive care.

Resources that are currently available for nurses to use to support their care of the farm population include the AgNurse Facebook page, AgriSafe, and AgAbility. The AgNurse Facebook page (www.facebook.com/Agriculture_nurse) provides up to date information on happenings in Kentucky regarding farm safety and health. AgriSafe (www.agrisafe.org) is a website run by health professionals and educators concerned with the health and safety of farm families and provides free educational programs for health care professionals. Finally, AgAbility (www.agability.org) provides direct assistance and education to help minimize obstacles and improve quality of life for farmers with disabilities. These websites may provide the most recent and accurate information regarding health and safety in Kentucky and can be used by nurses to stay on top of change in care for this group.

References

- Census of Agriculture (2014). *U.S. farmers and farmers*. Retrieved from http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2012/Preliminary_Report/Highlights.pdf
- International Society for Agricultural Safety and Health (2014). *Aging farmers: 10 tips for your health and safety*. Retrieved from <http://isash.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/5-ISASH-Aging-Farmers.pdf>
- Reed, D.B., Ravens, M.K., Conley, C.C., Westneat, S., & Adkins, S.M. (2012). Farm Elders Define Health as the Ability to Work. *Workplace Health and Safety*, 60, 345-361.
- Smith, J. (2013). *America's 10 deadliest jobs*. Retrieved from <http://www.forbes.com/sites/jacquelynsmith/2013/08/22/americas-10-deadliest-jobs-2/>
- Marcum, J.L., Browning, S.R., Reed, D.B., Charnigo, R.J. (2011a) Determinants of work hours among a cohort of male and female farmers 50 years and older in Kentucky and South Carolina (2002-2005). *Journal of Agromedicine*, 16(3): 163-173.
- Marcum, J.L., Browning, S.R., Reed, D.B., Charnigo, R.J. (2011b) Farmwork-Related Injury Among Farmers 50 Years of Age and Older in Kentucky and South Carolina: A Cohort Study, 2002-2005. *Journal of Agricultural Safety and Health*, 17(3): 259-27.

YOUR CALLING. YOUR EDUCATION.

Achieve Your Nursing Degree with Campbellsville University Online

Your degree is within reach at Campbellsville University Online. Earn the skills and knowledge you need from one of the Top 50 Most Affordable Christian Colleges in the U.S.* It's never too late to find your calling.

*christianuniversitiesonline.org



Visit online.campbellsville.edu/kynurse to get started.



Clark Regional
MEDICAL CENTER

Go to www.clarkregional.org to apply now!
Human Resources: 859.737.8276
175 Hospital Drive, Winchester, KY 40391