

'On Feirm Ground'

Developing a bespoke farmers' health training programme targeted at agricultural advisors in Ireland.

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Background

Farmers experience a disproportionate burden of health problems and are a ‘hard-to-reach’ group.

Agricultural advisors are uniquely positioned to support farmers on health issues but feel ill equipped with their skill level to do so.

Research approach

Study 1: A qualitative study to explore farmers’/agricultural advisors’ perspectives on health to inform programme design.

Study 2: A Consultation Forum with key ‘experts’ to test and refine the programme content prior to delivery.

Study 3: Cross sectional surveys to evaluate agricultural advisors’ personal practice (knowledge/skill/capacity) at pre/post/follow-up on engaging farmers on health.

Study 4: A qualitative study with Tutors/Trainers to explore the effectiveness of the process by which the Trainers are trained/supported to deliver the programme.

‘The most important cog in the wheel’: prioritising farmers’ health through a bespoke training programme

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Aim

Explore farmers’ and other key stakeholders’ experiences and perspectives in relation to farmers’ health and help-seeking behaviour.

Provide clear, actionable recommendations to inform a bespoke farmers’ health training programme.

Methods

- This study used an exploratory, qualitative design
- Focus groups (n=4) with farmers
 - Explore their perspectives concerning health (e.g. patterns of help-seeking and rural masculinities, barriers to self-care, and potential pathways to active engagement in health services).
- Focus groups with agricultural advisors (n=4), farming organisations (n=2) and female 'significant others' (n=1)
 - Explore attitudes, perspectives, needs and behaviours of the farming community and additionally explore the parameters of any potential health role for advisors/consultants.

Diversity in terms location, type of farming enterprise, broad age profile etc to give as broad representation as is feasible

- Thematic Content Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was conducted to analyse the data.

Results

Farming, rural masculinity and identity

- *Farming identity: 'it's in the genes'*

Ya, I think it's a pride thing, there are tough men out there in all weathers working hard and have the signs of hard work all over us. (F009)

But I don't think farmers understand their own importance to the farm. Like without them, the farm is nothing. They are the most important cog in the wheel... (FG003)

- *'Real' farmers don't ask for help*

I would say the old perception of 'we are hardy and we are men, and we are ok. We don't have problems'. That's the perception. (F003)

- *Relational aspects of farming and rural masculinity*

It took me about three years to basically bully my husband into going for a medical, you'd have to come up with all of these excuses. (FG004)

Results

Wrestling with challenges to autonomy and control within farming

- *Succession and inheritance*

It's that stagnation...you are 20 or 30 working at home, you don't know where you stand in relation to succession, you are making shit money...you have no opportunity to stamp your own authority on it. (F001)

- *Pressures associated with scale [and with scaling up]*

There's greed in it...instead of calving 40 cows over 4 months they're calving 120 over 6 weeks. Farmers are running themselves into the ground trying to keep up. (AA015)

- *Changing farming roles/ increased paperwork*

...they [older farmers] have this fear of Jesus if something's wrong...I'm gonna get thrown under the bus...they're terrified to make any mistake. (MNF003)

Results

Isolation and the demise of rural communities

- *Unravelling of 'meitheal' in rural communities*

...you don't actually meet enough people to develop the conversation around things. (FF006)

I remember growing up and you'd be working between the divider and the thresher. And you'd be threshing in two farms...we had that 'meitheal', and it was the finest two days of the year. None of that happens anymore. (F004)

- *Isolation and loneliness*

I think for the more isolated farmer, there is just no degree of perspective, where there is a problem on the farm. For instance, if a calf dies, they are ramming that around their heads all day; whereas [for] someone else, that is forgotten about by 11 o'clock. (AC003)

Conclusion

Implications in terms of informing the design of a farmers' health training programme

- Needs to take into account how farming identity and masculinities are shaped by a dynamic and evolving rural and farming context and intersect in complex ways with farming and health practices.
- Should recognise that farmers are not a homogenous group and that diversity in terms of age, gender, geography, marital status, caring responsibilities, enterprise and seasonal factors, predispose different sub-groups of farmers to different health challenges.
- A key aspect of engaging with farmers on health, is on creating a 'safe space' and empathising with the world of farmers, therefore, the proposed programme methodology should reflect this.

Broader implications from the findings of this study

- 'Farmers' health' should be seen as part of a cultural shift that places the wellbeing of farmers at the centre of farm productivity and as a core pillar of farming business success.
- Parallel measures that seek to combat rural isolation and to restore the social fabric of rural communities are critically important in terms of optimising the utility of the proposed programme in tackling the issue of loneliness among farmers.

Comments/Questions

