Epidemiology of Farm Injuries in New South Wales

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Abstract

Injuries to people living and working on farms in New South Wales continue to be a significant burden on the health system, Workers’ Compensation system, agricultural industries and farming families. Strategies to reduce the number and severity of injuries suffered by farmers and people working on farms rely on accurate information. Unfortunately there is no one dataset available to describe the circumstances surrounding farm injuries and the size of this burden in Australia. Hence, a number of different data sources are required to provide a picture of farm injuries. To date, there has been very little critical examination of what value each of these datasets provides to describing farm injuries.

This Thesis aimed to:

- Undertake surveillance of injuries occurring to people on farms or during agricultural production in NSW using data from an Emergency Department, NSW Hospital Separations information, NSW Workers’ Compensation Claims, and ABS Deaths data.
- Critically examine the utility of Emergency Department, Hospital, Workers’ Compensation, and ABS Deaths Data for the surveillance of farm injuries in NSW.
- Critically examine data classification systems used in Emergency Department, Hospital, Workers’ Compensation, and ABS Deaths data collections to describe the breadth of farm injuries in NSW.
- Define the priority areas for farm injury prevention initiatives in NSW based on the information obtained from the examination of the data from Emergency Department, Hospital, Workers’ Compensation, and ABS Deaths.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of the NSW Rollover Protective Structure (ROPS) rebate scheme and examine the utility of the data currently available in NSW to measure the performance of the program.

Four datasets, Tamworth Emergency Department, Hospital Separations, Workers’ Compensation and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Deaths data were used to provide information on the surveillance of farm injuries, describe the breadth of classifications used to describe farm injuries, and define priorities for the prevention of farm injuries.
There were 384 farm-related injuries which presented to the Emergency Department at the Tamworth Base Hospital between 1 September 1997 and 31 August 1998. Emergency Department data collected in this study used the Farm Injury Optimal Dataset (FIOD) for classification, which allowed for a comprehensive picture of the circumstances surrounding the injury event. The three most common external causes of injury were related to horses, motorcycles, and animals. Commonly people were working at the time of injury. Children represented 21% of the people injured. The average number of injuries per 100 farms per annum was 34.7.

An examination of hospital discharge data for NSW was undertaken for the period 1 July 1992 to 30 June 2000 where the location of the injury was a farm. Classification of cases in this dataset conformed to the International Classification of Disease (ICD) versions 9 and 10. There were 14,490 people who were injured on a farm during the study period. The three most common external causes of injury were motorcycles, animals being ridden and agricultural machinery. Children represented 17% of all farm injury cases. The rate per 1,000 farms ranged from 19 to 42 per annum.

An examination of Workers’ Compensation claims for agricultural industries in NSW between 1 July 1992 and 30 June 2001 was undertaken. The ‘Type of Occurrence’ classification system was used to code the claims. There were 24,332 claims of which the majority were males (82%). The incidence of injury / disease in agriculture per annum varied from 37 per 1,000 workers to 73 per 1,000 workers. The rate per 1,000 agricultural establishments varied from 54 to 76. The average cost of a claim was $10,880 and the average time lost per claims was 9.2 weeks. There were 81 deaths and 3,158 permanent disabilities. The three most common agents were sheep / goats (5%), ferrous and non-ferrous metals (5%), crates / cartons / boxes / etc (5%).

Using ABS deaths data to examine the deaths of people working and living on farms was limited to males whose occupation was recorded as ‘farmer and farm manager’ and ‘agricultural labourer and related worker’. There were 952 deaths over the period 1 January 1991 and 31 December 2000. The information provided a consistent series of cases over time. Areas where prevention should be directed included motor vehicle accidents; falls; agricultural machinery; other machinery; firearms; poisoning; and drowning.
Using any one of the datasets alone to examine people injured on farms not only underestimates the number of people injured, but also misses particular types of agents involved in farm injuries. Each of the datasets used in this Thesis provides a different perspective of farm injury in NSW. By examining the information together, there are a number of areas which are consistently represented in each dataset such as falls and agricultural machinery. While no one dataset provided all the information that would be useful for the prevention of injuries, the available information does provide direction for the development of prevention strategies.

The overall weakness of the information provided is that it misses a number of risk factors that contribute to farm injuries such as fatigue and training. The lack of appropriate denominator information also makes it difficult to directly compare the datasets and estimate the size of the problem. There are a number of additional coding categories that could be included in each dataset that would provide a better understanding of the different groups at risk of sustaining an injury on a farm or during agricultural work. These coding categories include activity at time of injury, admission to hospital, and occupation.

An example of the use of data to determine the effectiveness of a farm injury prevention program is the ‘NSW Rollover Protective Structure (ROPS) Rebate Scheme’ evaluation. Tractor rollover deaths have been identified as an issue for prevention by Farmsafe Australia; however, such deaths were not identified in any of the datasets used in this Thesis due to coding limitations in the ABS data. In this Thesis information about the evaluation of the ‘NSW ROPS Rebate Scheme’ is presented. The scheme was successful in fitting 10,449 ROPS to tractors and the following lessons were learnt: when providing a rebate, the administration (i.e. sending the cheque) needs to be done well; advertising is important and should be co-ordinated, increase the awareness of the risk(s) the intervention is aiming to prevent and effectiveness of subsequent solution(s); the program should ensure there is an increased awareness of the outcome the intervention is aiming to prevent; if regulation is part of the program, enforcement needs to undertaken; and should address any barriers to uptake.

The information provided in this Thesis highlights the substantial burden that farm injury places on the agricultural and rural sector of NSW. While there is no one data source that can describe the circumstances and the burden of farm injuries, the currently available datasets do
provide an insight into the circumstances of farm injuries and the burden these injuries place on health, Workers’ Compensation, agricultural industries and farming families.
Dedication & Acknowledgements

Thousands of farmers every year are injured in preventable accidents, many requiring time off work and some losing their lives, causing stress and concern for loved ones and the community. To examine the causes of farm injuries and provide strategies that will in the future lead to fewer people being injured and dying is a noble cause worth studying. To all those touched by the tragedy of injury and death from farm accidents I hope this study goes a little way in reducing your angst and a long way in ensuring we are not doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past.

In the process of undertaking a PhD there are a large number of people who play both small and large roles in helping you to achieve the degree. While there are a number of specific people I would like to thank there are also a number of people who will not be mentioned below, who without their support, insight or understanding it would not have been possible to finish my Thesis.

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Thank you all my friends and apologies one last time for birthdays, and other special occasions I have missed while writing the Thesis and hope that now it is finished we will be able to pick up from where we left off.

Finally I would like to thank the staff at the University of Sydney for their support and help.
Statement of Involvement

The studies described in this Thesis, and much of the analysis presented here, were based on three studies conducted while the author was a member of the Australian Centre for Agricultural Health and Safety. The author planned each study, led the study teams, and was the key participant in all aspects of the studies, but all team members made an important contribution to the successful outcome of the studies.

The author wrote all the content of this Thesis and conducted all analyses presented here. All figures were produced by the author.

Data for the Emergency Department study was collected by Dr John Davies and data for the ROPS Evaluation was collected by Kerri-Lynn Stark, both under the supervision of the author. Coding of raw data was conducted by all team members, including the author. Checking, corrections and analysis of data for the original reports was undertaken by the author.
Publications arising from the Thesis

Reports:

Published Articles
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# Table of Contents

Abstract................................................................................................................................................. ii
Dedication & Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................ vi
Statement of Involvement ....................................................................................................................... viii
Publications arising from the Thesis ................................................................................................. ix
  Reports: ................................................................................................................................................ ix
  Published Articles ............................................................................................................................ ix
Table of Contents ................................................................................................................................. x
List of Tables ......................................................................................................................................... xiii
List of Figures ........................................................................................................................................ xix
Glossary ................................................................................................................................................ xxiii
Chapter 1 Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 1
  1.1 Aims .................................................................................................................................................. 1
  1.2 Public Health ................................................................................................................................. 2
  1.3 Farm Injury in Australia ............................................................................................................... 2
  1.4 Structure of this Thesis .................................................................................................................... 3
  1.5 Coverage of this Thesis .................................................................................................................. 4
  1.6 Uses for the study ............................................................................................................................ 5
  1.7 Ethical Approval ............................................................................................................................. 6
Chapter 2 Literature Review .............................................................................................................. 7
  2.1 Introduction ...................................................................................................................................... 7
  2.2 A brief history of injury prevention and control in Australia, some seminal publications .......... 8
  2.3 Definitions ...................................................................................................................................... 9
  2.4 An overview of farm injuries in Australia by collection method ................................................... 14
  2.5 Models used in and for prevention of farm injuries ....................................................................... 23
  2.6 A brief examination of prevention strategies for farm injuries and deaths .................................. 27
  2.7 Conclusion ................................................................................................................................... 36
Chapter 3 Classification systems for farm injury events ............................................................... 38
  3.1 Introduction ..................................................................................................................................... 38
  3.2 International Classification of Diseases (ICD) ............................................................................. 39
  3.3 Type of Occurrence Classification System ..................................................................................... 41
  3.4 Farm Injury Optimal Dataset (FIOD) ............................................................................................. 43
  3.5 Discussion of injury classification systems .................................................................................... 46
Chapter 4 Emergency Department Data ........................................................................................ 48
  4.1 Introduction .................................................................................................................................... 48
  4.2 Aim .................................................................................................................................................. 48
  4.3 Methods ......................................................................................................................................... 49
  4.4 Results .......................................................................................................................................... 54
  4.5 Discussion ....................................................................................................................................... 76
  4.6 Conclusion .................................................................................................................................... 87
List of Tables

Table 1 Farmsafe Australia e-code groups ................................................................. 17
Table 2 Factors that contribute to the hazards involved in farming, adapted from Murphy 118 ................................................................. 30
Table 3 Data Items within the Farm Injury Optimal Dataset and source for coding ................................................................. 45
Table 4 Strengths and limitations of classification systems used in this Thesis ................................................................. 47
Table 5 Injury rate per 100 farms per annum by postcode, Tamworth Base Hospital, Sep 1997-Aug 1998 .......... 56
Table 6 General activity being undertaken at time of injury by outcome, Tamworth Base Hospital, Sep 1997-Aug 1998 ................................................................. 57
Table 7 External cause of injury by gender, Tamworth Base Hospital, Sep 1997-Aug 1998 ................................................................. 59
Table 8 External cause of injury by mechanism of injury, Tamworth Base Hospital, Sep 1997-Aug 1998 .................. 60
Table 9 External cause of injury by selected activities, Tamworth Base Hospital, Sep 1997-Aug 1998 .................. 61
Table 10 Agricultural enterprise type by gender and selected activities, Tamworth Base Hospital, Sep 1997-Aug 1998 ................................................................. 62
Table 11 Agricultural enterprise type by grouped agency, Tamworth Base Hospital, Sep 1997-Aug 1998 ........ 63
Table 12 Location on farm where injury occurred by gender and selected activities, Tamworth Base Hospital, Sep 1997-Aug 1998 ................................................................. 64
Table 13 Employment status by gender and selected activities, Tamworth Base Hospital, Sep 1997-Aug 1998 .................. 65
Table 14 Occupation by gender and selected activities, Tamworth Base Hospital, Sep 1997-Aug 1998 .................. 65
Table 15 Body location by injury type, Tamworth Base Hospital, Sep 1997-Aug 1998 ................................................................. 66
Table 16 Age group by gender of children, farm-related injuries, Tamworth Base Hospital, Sep 1997 – Aug 1998 .......... 67
Table 17 Injury type by anatomical site of children, farm-related injuries, Tamworth Base Hospital, Sep 1997 – Aug 1998† ................................................................. 69
Table 18 Injury, age and common agents by admission to hospital of children, farm-related injuries, Tamworth Base Hospital, Sep 1997 – Aug 1998 ................................................................. 70
Table 19 Age and gender distribution of persons injured in horse and motorcycle-related injuries on farms, Tamworth area, Sep 1997 - Aug 1998 ................................................................. 71
Table 20 Activity undertaken at time of accident by persons injured in horse and motorcycle-related injuries on farms, Tamworth area, Sep 1997 - Aug 1998 ................................................................. 72
Table 21 Employment status of persons injured in horse and motorcycle-related injuries on farms, Tamworth area, Sep 1997 - Aug 1998 ................................................................. 73
Table 22 Anatomical site and nature of injuries suffered by of persons injured in horse and motorcycle-related injuries on farms, Tamworth area, Sep 1997 - Aug 1998 ................................................................. 73
Table 23 Work-phase of persons injured in horse and motorcycle-related injuries on farms, Tamworth area, Sep 1997 - Aug 1998 ................................................................. 75
Table 24 ICD9 and ICD10 Coding for Place of Occurrence ................................................................. 94
Table 25 Farmsafe Australia E-code groups ................................................................. 95
Table 26 E-codes that are only used where location is farm or are more likely to occur on a farm ................................................................. 95
Table 27 E-codes that could occur on a farm or not ................................................................. 96
Table 28 E-codes where it is unlikely that they would occur on a farm ................................................................. 97
Table 29 E-codes where it is not possible for the place of occurrence to be farm ................................................................. 98
Table 30 Coding of readmission within 28 days ................................................................................................... 99
Table 31 Readmission of farm injuries within 28 days ....................................................................................... 100
Table 32 Number of agricultural establishments in NSW with an estimated value of agricultural output of more than $5,000 by year.................................................................................................. 100
Table 33 E-code likelihood of occurring on a farm over time, NSW 1-Jul-90 to 30-Jun-00............................... 103
Table 34 E-code grouped over time, NSW 1-Jul-90 to 30-Jun-00 ................................................................... 104
Table 35 Place of occurrence without same day stays, NSW 1-Jul-90 to 30-Jun-00......................................... 105
Table 36 Grouped length of stay by year without same day stays, NSW 1-Jul-90 to 30-Jun-00 ....................... 106
Table 37 Place of occurrence by likelihood of the injury by E-code occurring on a farm (all cases) ............... 107
Table 39 External cause code by the place of occurrence for cases identified as likely to occur on farms, NSW 1-Jul-90 to 30-Jun-00 ........................................................................................................... 108
Table 40 Place of occurrence by year where the external cause code was E828.2 - Accident involving animal being ridden - Rider of animal, NSW 1-Jul-90 to 30-Jun-00 ........................................................................ 110
Table 41 Readmission to hospital within 28 days, NSW 1-Jul-90 to 30-Jun-00 ................................................. 110
Table 42 Farmsafe Australia (FSA) E-code groupings by year, 1 July 1990 to 30 June 2000......................... 113
Table 43 Annual rate per 1,000 farms for injuries requiring hospitalisation in NSW.................................. 117
Table 44 Farmsafe Australia E-code grouping and injury type by mean length of stay (days), NSW Hospital separations, 1 July 1990 to 30 June 2000 ................................................................................................................. 118
Table 45 Farmsafe Australia E-code grouping body location by mean length of stay, NSW Hospital separations, 1 July 1990 to 30 June 2000 ................................................................................................................. 120
Table 46 Gender by age groups, 0-14 years, 15 – 64 years and 65+ years, NSW Hospital separations, Farm Injuries, 1 July 1990 to 30 June 2000 ........................................................................................................... 123
Table 47 Gender by 5 year age groups for children, NSW Hospital separations, 1 July 1990 to 30 June 2000 123
Table 48 Farmsafe Australia E-code groups by age groups, 0-14 years, 15 – 64 years and 65+ years, NSW Hospital separations, 1 July 1990 to 30 June 2000 ......................................................................................... 124
Table 49 Injury type by body location injured, children, NSW Hospital separations, 1 July 1990 to 30 June 2000 .......................................................................................................................... 127
Table 50 Rate of injury from hospital separations using FSA codes for Victoria (1July 1993 to 30 June 1998), NSW (1 July 1993 to 30 June 2000) and Western Australia (1 July 1993 to 30 June 1999)......................... 130
Table 51 Workers’ Compensation Premium Rates in NSW 2002/2003 – Agriculture and Services to Agriculture .............................................................................................................................. 142
Table 52 Employed persons (‘000), hours worked (‘000) and average hours worked for the Agriculture industry in NSW by quarter 1 Jul 1992 to 30 Jun 2001 .............................................................................. 143
Table 53 Establishments with agricultural activity, NSW .................................................................................. 146
Table 54 Changes to denominator used to calculate annual labour force rates, number of people employed... 148
Table 55 Half year of injury by half year in which a claim was made to the Workers’ Compensation system for people employed in Agricultural industries, 1 July 1992 to 30 June 2001 151
Table 56 Gender of people compensated via Workers’ Compensation and employed in Agricultural industries, 1 July 1992 to 30 June 2001 ........................................................................................................... 152
Table 57 Age groups of people seeking Workers’ Compensation and employed in Agricultural industries, 1
Table 58 Total Compensation Payments by Industry for NSW Workers’ Compensation claims, 1992/93 to 2000/01* ............................................................... 154
Table 59 Outcome of injury for workers employed in Agricultural industries, 1 July 1992 to 30 June 2001..... 156
Table 60 Actual time lost (Weeks) due to a compensated injury by industry, NSW Workers’ Compensation, 1992/93-2000/01 ................................................................. 157
Table 61 Occupations at subdivision level* of people who claimed Workers’ Compensation in Agricultural industries, NSW Workers’ compensation, 1992/93-2000/01...................................................... 158
Table 62 Grouped nature of injury/disease by grouped bodily location, NSW Workers’ Compensation claims, 1992/93-2000/01 ........................................................................................................................... 159
Table 63 Grouped mechanism of injury/disease by grouped agency, NSW Workers’ Compensation claims, 1992/93-2000/01 ........................................................................................................................................ 160
Table 64 Grouped agencies by agent of injury*, NSW Workers’ Compensation claims, 1992/93-2000/01........ 161
Table 65 Status of claim (closed or not) by financial year, by number of claims and mean cost of claims, NSW Workers’ Compensation, 1992/93-2000/01 ................................................................. 162
Table 66 Month by financial year, NSW Workers’ Compensation claims, Horticulture Industries, 1 July 1992 to 30 June 2001 ............................................................................................................. 163
Table 67 Agency of Injury by financial year, NSW Workers’ Compensation claims, Horticulture Industries, 1 July 1992 to 30 June 2001............................................................................................................. 164
Table 68 Mechanism of Injury by financial year, NSW Workers’ Compensation claims, Horticulture Industries, 1 July 1992 to 30 June 2001 ............................................................................................................. 165
Table 69 Month of Injury by financial year, NSW Workers’ Compensation claims in Grain, Sheep and Beef Cattle Farming Industries, 1 July 1992 to 30 June 2001 ..................................................................................... 166
Table 70 Agency of Injury by financial year, NSW Workers’ Compensation claims in Grain, Sheep and Beef Cattle Farming Industries, 1 July 1992 to 30 June 2001 ..................................................................................... 167
Table 71 Mechanism of Injury by financial year, NSW Workers’ Compensation claims in Grain, Sheep and Beef Cattle Farming Industries, 1 July 1992 to 30 June 2001 ..................................................................................... 168
Table 72 Month of Injury by financial year, NSW Workers’ Compensation claims in Dairy Cattle Farming Industries, 1 July 1992 to 30 June 2001 ..................................................................................... 169
Table 73 Agency of Injury by financial year, NSW Workers’ Compensation claims in Dairy Cattle Farming Industries, 1 July 1992 to 30 June 2001 ..................................................................................... 170
Table 74 Mechanism of Injury by financial year, NSW Workers’ Compensation claims in Dairy Cattle Farming Industries, 1 July 1992 to 30 June 2001 ..................................................................................... 171
Table 75 Month of Injury by financial year, NSW Workers’ Compensation claims in Poultry Farming Industries, 1 July 1992 to 30 June 2001 ..................................................................................... 172
Table 76 Agency of Injury by financial year, NSW Workers’ Compensation claims in Poultry Farming Industries, 1 July 1992 to 30 June 2001 ..................................................................................... 173
Table 77 Mechanism of Injury by financial year, NSW Workers’ Compensation claims in Poultry Farming Industries, 1 July 1992 to 30 June 2001 ..................................................................................... 174
Table 78 Month of Injury by financial year, NSW Workers’ Compensation claims in Other Livestock Farming Industries, 1 July 1992 to 30 June 2001 ..................................................................................... 175

List of Tables xv
unintentional fatalities (year of registration 1991-2000) .................................................................................................................. 230

Table 102 Other drugs by ‘farmers and farm managers’ and ‘agricultural labourers and related workers’,
unintentional fatalities (year of registration 1991-2000) .................................................................................................................. 230

Table 103 Day of week by ‘farmers and farm managers’ and ‘agricultural labourers and related workers’,
unintentional fatalities (year of registration 1991-2000) .................................................................................................................. 231

Table 104 Number of fall-related fatalities for ‘farmers and farm managers’ and ‘agricultural labourers and
related workers’ by year (year of registration 1991-2000) .................................................................................................................. 232

Table 105 Intent by ‘farmers and farm managers’ and ‘agricultural labourers and related workers’, (year of
registration 1991-2000) ........................................................................................................................................................................ 235

Table 106 Intent by marital status for ‘farmers and farm managers’ and ‘agricultural labourers and related
workers’, (year of registration 1991-2000) ......................................................................................................................................... 236

Table 107 Intent by alcohol for ‘farmers and farm managers’ and ‘agricultural labourers and related

Table 108 Intent by drugs for ‘farmers and farm managers’ and ‘agricultural labourers and related

Table 109 Day of week by intent for ‘farmers and farm managers’ and ‘agricultural labourers and related

Table 110 Proposed Farmsafe Australia Coding Schema .................................................................................................................. 261

Table 111 Number of tractor run-over and rollover deaths in NSW between 1988 and 2004 .................................................................. 269

Table 112 Australian and New Zealand Standard Industrial Classification (ANZIC) for agriculture and
services to agriculture ................................................................................................................................................................................ 276

Table 113 Response rates for the return of the surveys .................................................................................................................................. 280

Table 114 Number of ROPS fitted by Division and Year .................................................................................................................. 288

Table 115 Number of ROPS fitted by Enterprise Type .................................................................................................................. 289

Table 116 ROPS fitted by region, full-time, hobby and other farmers .................................................................................................. 291

Table 117 Region by members of professional associations ........................................................................................................ 291

Table 118 Make of tractor on which a ROPS was fitted .................................................................................................................. 292

Table 119 Decade tractor was manufactured by number of ROPS fitted .................................................................................................. 293

Table 120 Cost of ROPS ($) .................................................................................................................................................................... 293

Table 121 Cost of fitment of ROPS ($) .................................................................................................................................................. 294

Table 122 Enterprise type by number of ROPS fitted, enterprise correct, sampled and % sampled .................................................. 296

Table 123 Division by number sampled, ROPS fitted and percentage sampled .................................................................................. 297

Table 124 Received rebate within four weeks by happy with program .................................................................................................. 297

Table 125 Enough publicity by how people heard about the scheme .................................................................................................. 299

Table 126 Size of Farm (Hectares) .................................................................................................................................................. 305

Table 127 Purchase primary tractor new or second hand by all tractors fitted with a ROPS .................................................................. 309

Table 128 Number of tractors without a ROPS by Region .................................................................................................................. 312

Table 129 Effectiveness of ROPS by all tractors having a ROPS ........................................................................................................ 314

Table 130 Knowledge of ROPS as a legal requirement by all tractors having a ROPS .................................................................. 314

Table 131 Knowledge of a serious injury or death from a tractor rollover by all tractors having a ROPS
fitted ...................................................................................................................................................................................................... 317
Table 132 Involvement in a tractor rollover or near rollover by all tractors having a ROPS ...................... 318
Table 133 Thought drivers of tractors on their farms were at risk of a rollover by all tractors having a ROPS 319
Table 134 Employees on farm by all tractors have a ROPS .............................................................................. 320
Table 135 Heard about the ROPS scheme by all tractors have a ROPS ............................................................ 321
Table 136 Fitted a ROPS under scheme by all tractors have ROPS .................................................................. 323
Table 137 Would have fitted a ROPS if there was no rebate by all tractors having a ROPS ............................. 324
Table 138 Summary of the strengths and weaknesses of each dataset used in this Thesis ................................. 343
List of Figures

Figure 1 Farmsafe Australia model of strategy development and implementation .............................................. 25
Figure 2 Location of Tamworth and where people came from who were injured in the study ............................ 49
Figure 3 Tamworth Base Hospital Injury Data Collection Form page 1 ............................................................. 51
Figure 4 Tamworth Base Hospital Injury Data Collection Form page 2 ............................................................. 52
Figure 5 Age group by gender, number of injuries presenting to the Tamworth Base Hospital, Sep 1997-Aug 1998 (n=384) ................................................................................................................... ................................ 54
Figure 6 Map of postcodes where injuries occurred by Rate per 100 farms ....................................................... 55
Figure 7 Age group by selected activities, Tamworth Base Hospital, Sep 1997-Aug 1998 (n=339) ............... 58
Figure 8 Average age at time of injury by gender and agent, Tamworth area, Sep 1997 - Aug 1998............ 71
Figure 9 Number of people separated with a principal diagnosis of injury from NSW Hospitals, 1-Jul-90 to 30-Jun-00 ...................................................................................................................... ................................ 102
Figure 10 Day stay and longer stay by year, NSW 1-Jul-90 to 30-Jun-00 .......................................................... 105
Figure 11 Farm injuries separated from NSW Hospitals, 1 July 1990 to 30 June 2000 .................................... 111
Figure 12 Farm injuries separated from NSW Hospitals by age groups and gender, 1 July 1990 to 30 June 2000 ............................................................................................................................................. 112
Figure 13 Farmsafe Australia E-code grouping by average length of stay (95% confidence intervals), 1 July 1990 to 30 June 2000 ........................................................................................................................................... 114
Figure 14 Age groups by average length of stay (95% confidence intervals), 1 July 1990 to 30 June 2000.... 115
Figure 15 Three age groups by Farmsafe Australia grouped E-codes by average length of stay, 1 July 1990 to 30 June 2000 ............................................................................................................................................. 115
Figure 16 Number of farm injuries hospitalised by month, 1 Jul 1993 to 30 June 1998 (n=7735)................. 116
Figure 17 Number of farm injuries by month requiring hospitalisation in NSW, 1 July 1990 to 30 June 2000 (n=7735) ............................................................................................................................................. 116
Figure 18 Day of week of farm injury by gender, NSW Hospital separations, 1 July 1990 to 30 June 2000 (N=14,479)........................................................................................................................................... 121
Figure 19 Distribution of farm injuries by postcode, NSW 1 July 1990 to 30 June 2000 (n=13,732)............ 122
Figure 20 Distribution of farm injuries by SLA, NSW 1 July 1990 to 30 June 2000 (n=14,490) ................. 122
Figure 21 Day of the week by age groups, 0-14 years, 15 – 64 years and 65+ years, NSW Hospital separations, 1 July 1990 to 30 June 2000 ..................................................................................................... 125
Figure 22 Number of farm injuries hospitalised by month and age groups (0-14 years and 65+ years), 1 Jul 1993 to 30 June 1998 (n=2158) .......................................................................................................... 125
Figure 23 Number of farm injuries hospitalised by month and age groups (0-14 years and 65+ years), 1 Jul 1998 to 30 June 2000 (n=350) .......................................................................................................... 126
Figure 24 Number of farm injuries requiring hospitalisation by month and age groups (0-14 years and 65+ years), 1 Jul 1998 to 30 June 2000 (n=4,130) .................................................................................. 126
Figure 25 Number of persons (‘000) and hours worked (‘000), employed in Agriculture eligible for Workers’ Compensation 263 ........................................................................................................................................... 147
Figure 26 Incidence of injury / disease by quarter, agriculture, NSW Workers’ Compensation claims, 1 July 1992 to 30 June 2001 ........................................................................................................................................... 153
Figure 27  Incidence of injury / disease by financial year, agriculture, NSW Workers’ Compensation claims, 1 July 1992 to 30 June 2001 .......................................................................................................................... 153

Figure 28  Rate of injury / disease by 1,000 agricultural establishments by year, agriculture, NSW Workers’ Compensation claims, 1 January 1993 to 30 December 2000 ........................................................................................................ 154

Figure 29  Incidence of injury / disease by 1,000 workers by quarter by gender and employed full-time/part-time, agriculture, NSW Workers’ Compensation claims, 1 July 1992 to 30 June 2001 ................................................................. 164

Figure 30  Frequency of injury / disease per 1,000,000 hours worked by quarter by gender and employed full-time/part-time, agriculture, NSW Workers’ Compensation claims, 1 July 1992 to 30 June 2001 ........................................................................................................ 165

Figure 31  Incidence of injury / disease by quarter, horticulture, NSW Workers’ Compensation claims, 1 July 1992 to 30 June 2001 ........................................................................................................... 167

Figure 32  Incidence of injury / disease by financial year, horticultural industries, NSW Workers’ Compensation claims, 1 July 1992 to 30 June 2001 ........................................................................................................ 168

Figure 33  Incidence of injury / disease by quarter, Grain, Sheep and Beef Cattle Farming Industries, NSW Workers’ Compensation claims, 1 July 1992 to 30 June 2001 ........................................................................................................ 171

Figure 34  Incidence of injury / disease by financial year, Grain, Sheep and Beef Cattle Farming Industries, NSW Workers’ Compensation claims, 1 July 1992 to 30 June 2001 ........................................................................................................ 172

Figure 35  Incidence of injury / disease by quarter, dairy, NSW Workers’ Compensation claims, 1 July 1992 to 30 June 2001 ........................................................................................................... 175

Figure 36  Incidence of injury / disease by financial year, dairy, NSW Workers’ Compensation claims, 1 July 1992 to 30 June 2001 ........................................................................................................ 176

Figure 37  Incidence of injury / disease by quarter, poultry, NSW Workers’ Compensation claims, 1 July 1992 to 30 June 2001 ........................................................................................................... 179

Figure 38  Incidence of injury / disease by financial year, poultry, NSW Workers’ Compensation claims, 1 July 1992 to 30 June 2001 ........................................................................................................ 180

Figure 39  Incidence of injury / disease by quarter, Other Livestock Farming Industries, NSW Workers’ Compensation claims, 1 July 1992 to 30 June 2001 ........................................................................................................ 183

Figure 40  Incidence of injury / disease by financial year, Other Livestock Farming Industries, NSW Workers’ Compensation claims, 1 July 1992 to 30 June 2001 ........................................................................................................ 184

Figure 41  Incidence of injury / disease by quarter, agriculture, NSW Workers’ Compensation claims, 1 July 1992 to 30 June 2001 ........................................................................................................... 187

Figure 42  Incidence of injury / disease by financial year, agriculture, NSW Workers’ Compensation claims, 1 July 1992 to 30 June 2001 ........................................................................................................ 188

Figure 43  Number of deaths and rate per 10,000 agricultural establishments, NSW Workers’ Compensation claims agricultural industries, 1 July 1992 to 30 June 2001 ........................................................................................................ 190

Figure 44  Number of deaths by age group, NSW Workers’ Compensation claims agricultural industries, 1 July 1992 to 30 June 2001 ........................................................................................................ 191

Figure 45  Number of deaths by month of death, NSW Workers’ Compensation claims agricultural industries, 1 July 1992 to 30 June 2001 ........................................................................................................ 192

Figure 46  Number of deaths by occupation group, NSW Workers’ Compensation claims agricultural industries, 1 July 1992 to 30 June 2001 ........................................................................................................ 192

Figure 47  Rate of death for ‘farmers and farm managers’ and ‘agricultural labourers and related workers’
by agricultural establishments, hours worked and number employed (year of registration 1991-2000)...... 223

Figure 48 Unintentional rate of death for ‘farmers and farm managers’ and ‘agricultural labourers and related workers’ by agricultural establishments, hours worked and number employed (year of registration 1991-2000) ........................................................................................................ ........................ 226

Figure 49 Age by occupation status for ‘farmers and farm managers’ and ‘agricultural labourers and related workers’, unintentional fatalities (year of registration 1991-2001) (N=952)........................................................................ 227

Figure 50 Usual area of residence for NSW ‘farmers and farm managers’ and ‘agricultural labourers and related workers’ unintentionally fatally injured (year of registration 1991-2000) .................................................................................... 228

Figure 51 Month by ‘farmers and farm managers’ and ‘agricultural labourers and related workers’, unintentional fatalities (year of registration 1991-2000)................................................................................................................... 231

Figure 52 Number of fall-related deaths per annum for ‘farmers and farm managers’ and ‘agricultural labourers and related workers’ by year of death 1991-2000 .................................................................................................................. 233

Figure 53 Age groups by occupation for ‘farmers and farm managers’ and ‘agricultural labourers and related workers’, fall-related fatalities (year of registration 1991-2000).................................................................................... 233

Figure 54 Fall-related death by month for ‘farmers and farm managers’ and ‘agricultural labourers and related workers’ (year of registration 1991-2000)........................................................................................................ 234

Figure 55 Intent by age for ‘farmers and farm managers’ and ‘agricultural labourers and related workers’, (year of registration 1991-2000)................................................................................................................... 236

Figure 56 FarmSAFE Australia model of strategy development and implementation .......................................... 250

Figure 57 Farm Injury Pyramid for NSW............................................................................................................... 252

Figure 58 Statistical Regions of New South Wales ..................................................................................................... 272

Figure 59 ROPS installed and ROPS rebates entered into database by Month and Year, with identification of Key ROPS Scheme Dates.................................................................................................................. 290

Figure 60 Cost of ROPS by date entered into database.................................................................................................................. 294

Figure 61 Reason for fitting a ROPS .......................................................................................................................................................... 298

Figure 62 Reason for not fitting a ROPS ........................................................................................................................................ 301

Figure 63 Factors taken into account when deciding on the type of tractor to buy ........................................................................................................ 302

Figure 64 Prompts for farmers to fit a ROPS .................................................................................................................................................. 302

Figure 65 Age of respondents to Follow-up survey .................................................................................................................. 303

Figure 66 Respondents reported commodities produced by ANZSIC (N=779).................................................................................................................. 304

Figure 67 Age group of respondents general farming community survey (N=779) ........................................................................................................................................ 305

Figure 68 Average number of operational tractors per farm by WorkCover region ................................................. 306

Figure 69 Average age of oldest operational tractor by WorkCover region ........................................................................................................................................ 306

Figure 70 Average age of newest tractor by WorkCover region ........................................................................................................................................ 307

Figure 71 Average age of the primary tractor by WorkCover region ........................................................................................................................................ 307

Figure 72 Average Horse power of tractor by WorkCover region ........................................................................................................................................ 308

Figure 73 Purchase of primary tractor, new vs second hand by WorkCover region ........................................................................................................................................ 308

Figure 74 Average age of the estimated working life of a new tractor (n=605)........................................................................................................................................ 309

Figure 75 Average duration between purchases of a tractor (n=311) ........................................................................................................................................ 310

Figure 76 Average estimated life left in primary tractor (n=651) ........................................................................................................................................ 310

Figure 77 Factors that influence farmers decision to buy a tractor (N=779)........................................................................................................................................ 311
Figure 78 Percentage of farms by region for all tractors on the farm having a ROPS (N=779) ........................................... 312
Figure 79 ROPS with compliance plates by region (N=779) .................................................................................... 313
Figure 80 Perceive ROPS is effective by region (N=779) .................................................................................... 313
Figure 81 Knew ROPS was a legal requirement since 1982 by region (N=779) .................................................. 314
Figure 82 Reasons for not fitting a ROPS (n=230) .............................................................................................. 315
Figure 83 Prompts for getting farmers to fit a ROPS (N=779) ............................................................................. 316
Figure 84 Percentage of respondents that knew about a serious injury or death in their region from a tractor rollover (N=779) .......................................................................................................................... 316
Figure 85 Percentage of respondents that had a rollover or near rollover experience (N=779) ......................... 317
Figure 86 Percentage of respondents that thought drivers of their tractors were at risk of a rollover by region (N=779) ................................................................................................................................ 318
Figure 87 Percentage of respondents who had employees on their farm by region (N=779) ......................... 320
Figure 88 Percentage of respondents that had about the ROPS scheme by region (N=779) ............................... 321
Figure 89 How respondents heard about the ROPS Scheme (n=592) ........................................................................ 322
Figure 90 Percentage of people who had heard about the ROPS Scheme that fitted a ROPS under the scheme (n=592) .......................................................................................................................... 322
Figure 91 Reason for fitting a ROPS (n=168) ............................................................................................................. 323
Figure 92 Respondents who had heard about the ROPS scheme and fitted a ROPS and said they would have fitted the ROPS without the rebate by Region (n=168) ..................................................................................... 324
Figure 93 Percentage of respondents that had heard about the ROPS scheme and thought there was enough publicity by Region (n=592) .......................................................... 325
Figure 94 ROPS installed and ROPS rebates entered into database by Month and Year, with identification of Key ROPS Scheme Dates including compliance programs .......................................................... 326
Figure 95 Farm Injury Pyramid for NSW .............................................................................................................. 344
The use of the word accident is controversial and the source of considerable debate in the discipline of injury prevention. Some advocates recommend the use of such phrases as ‘incident’ or ‘injury event’. For the purposes of this Thesis ‘Accident’ is used in the natural parlance where the source is obvious.

Hierarchy of Control is a five level guide to the effectiveness of an intervention. The order is as follows:

1. Eliminate the hazard (risk)
2. Substitute for a lesser hazard (risk)
3. Engineer out the hazard (risk)
4. Design safer work procedures (management)
5. Use personal protective equipment (PPE)

Hospital Separations Data are one tool which can be used to measure incidence and prevalence of serious diseases and injury.

ICD International Classification of Diseases
ICE International Collaboration Effort
Jan January
Jul July
Jun June

Labour force All persons aged 15 years and older who are not members of Australian permanent defence forces or foreign defence force personnel stationed in Australia, diplomatic personnel of overseas governments, and overseas residents in Australia. It should be noted that labour force is usually broken down into employed and job seekers (which is further broken down into those in the labour force (unemployed and part-time workers (less than 10 hours & looking for work) and not in the labour force (discouraged job seekers, attending educational institution and wanted to work but not available))

LOS Length of Stay
Mar March

National Occupational Health and Safety Commission is now called the Australian Safety and Compensation Council.
NCIS National Coroners Information System
NEC Not Elsewhere Classified
NHPA National Health Priority Areas
Nov November
NSW New South Wales
Oct October
OHS Occupational Health and Safety
OSHA Occupational Safety and Health Administration
PHP Personal Hearing Protection
PPE Personal Protective Equipment
PTO  Power Take Off
Risk factor  A measurable characteristic associated with a higher probability of occurring
RLSSA  Royal Life Saving Society Australia
ROPS  Rollover Protective Structure
SLA  Statistical Local Area
Sep  September

Separation is defined “…as the process by which an episode of care for an admitted patient ceases. A separation may be formal or statistical. Formal separation: the process by which a hospital records the cessation of treatment and/or care and/or accommodation of a patient. Statistical separation: the administrative process by which a hospital records the cessation of an episode of care for a patient within the one hospital stay…” p387

TBH  Tamworth Base Hospital
US  United States of America

WorkerCover  The Work Health Authority responsible for workers health and safety and in NSW the compensation of work related injuries and death.

Workers’ Compensation – Refers to the insurance scheme in Australia where by the employer pays a statutory body to cover worker related injuries and diseases that an employee may suffer while undertaking work. In this Thesis Workers’ Compensation claims refers to those claims made against the NSW Workers’ Compensation insurance scheme.