



Inaugural WA Agriculture WHS State Conference 2026

Onfarm mental health a workplace issue

By **PERRI POLSON**

OVER the years, conversations around mental health have become more commonplace in the bush, in a bid to reduce stigma and prevent suicide.

But with farm work and business intertwined with many people's personal lives, a perhaps less-talked-about point on mental health is psychosocial safety.

WorkSafe principal scientific inspector, Terrence Chia, spoke about psychosocial safety at the SafeFarms WA Conference on Friday, outlining that the term 'psychosocial' is the intersection between the mind and culture, in this instance, workplace culture.

"You may have thought, I've signed up to manage a farm, manage a business, and now I'm expected to manage people's feelings, everyone's mental health as well?" Mr Chia said.

"What if it's not about fixing the people, what if it's about how the work is structured?"

Psychosocial hazards are defined as workplace factors and conditions that may cause psychological harm.

"The responsibility of the person conducting a business or undertaking (PCBU) is to protect the health of workers, and when we say health, we actually mean both physical and psychological health," Mr Chia said.



□ WorkSafe principal scientific inspector, Terrence Chia, at the SafeFarms WA conference.

"It's the same duty of care towards physical risk."

Psychosocial hazards stem from four key factors – the design of work, the environment work takes place in, machinery and equipment being used, and workplace interactions.

Some general examples of psychosocial hazards include working long hours in isolation,

high workloads, inappropriate workplace behaviour, lack of clarity around a role, lack of training, and exposure to traumatic incidents.

Within agriculture, there are a number of psychosocial hazards inherent to the industry.

"I know that in agriculture, there are a lot of things outside your control, unpredictable sea-

“*Environment shapes behaviour and small infrastructure differences can have a big psychosocial impact as well.*”

TERRENCE CHIA

sons, the weather, price fluctuations, even shortage of labour," Mr Chia said.

"And you have a culture of working hard, there is a culture of self-reliance, you don't want to be a burden on other people, so you take on a lot of things you don't really voice out.

"Over time, the stress will build.

"Every farm is so different, and has different risks and hazards."

Mr Chia said psychosocial risks could be managed with the same risk management approach framework applied to physical risks, and used a template from the WorkSafe website to go through examples.

The first step was to check in with employees to identify the risks at hand.

"Some of the things you can

do is talk, observe, look at behaviour," Mr Chia said.

Secondly, assess the risk, and then take action.

The final step is to re-evaluate the strategies put into place, and see what is, or is not working.

At this stage, the PCBU can ensure that no unintended problems have also arisen.

A workplace system, if designed well, can be crucial to reducing harm and preventing fatigue.

"Make sure that when people take breaks, the space for taking breaks is actually usable," Mr Chia said.

"We're currently in a really hot season, so shade, access to toilets and water is important.

"It does affect how people pace themselves at work.

"Environment shapes behaviour and small infrastructure differences can have a big psychosocial impact as well."

Mr Chia said a positive psychosocial culture needed to be modeled by good leadership.

"Leadership behaviour sets the tone, your workers watch what you do more than what you say," he said.

"That is what they see as acceptable in that workplace, in that team, and that's why leadership is really important.

"You do not rise to the level of your goals, you fail to the level of your systems."

Food for thought:

HERE is a selection of quotes from people who attended the SafeFarms WA conference in Perth on Friday.

“*If you love farming, you need to look after yourself.*”
– LIBBY FINLAYSON, LIFE COACH

“*My advice is to get an audit done and start somewhere. If you haven't already, don't be scared of it, because the worst thing you can do is stick your head in the sand and think it won't happen to you.*”
– JIM HAMILTON, VOLUNTEER AMBULANCE OFFICER, ST JOHN WA

“*Safety matters, not as paperwork and not as compliance, but as a commitment to keep people alive and well.*”
– JAIME REBELO, DIRECTOR, INDUSTRIAL AND REGIONAL INDUSTRIES, WORKSAFE

“*If you blokes are my age, just be aware when you're doing stuff, you're pushing the limits and you can't get away with what you used to do.*”
– DAN SANDERSON, PRESIDENT, BUSHFIRE VOLUNTEERS

“*Don't rush or do things in a hurry, that is when accidents can happen. Bystanders become lifesavers.*”
– JUSTIN FONTE, HEAD OF GROWTH AND INNOVATION, ST JOHN WA



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