

# Farm Family Health

## Statement of Need

April 28, 2003

*Draft 1*

### **Farm Families More Often Uninsured/Underinsured**

18% of Wisconsin dairy farm families are completely uninsured. Another 41% of dairy farmers have high deductible plans providing only major medical coverage. Four out of five lack health insurance covering check-ups and preventive care.

In addition to the uninsured farm families noted above, another 22% of Wisconsin dairy farm families have at least one uninsured family member, most often being children.

These rates of being uninsured, underinsured, and lacking preventive care coverage are far above the state average for non-farm households, and twice the rates of other types of farm households. Without insurance farmers are not likely to seek medical treatment for minor accidents and chronic conditions such as high blood pressure, diabetes, farmer's lung, milker's knee, melanoma, hearing problems, arthritis, bruises or broken bones. They are also unlikely to seek out preventive care and well-checks for themselves or their children due to cost.

### **Today's Farm Lifestyle Full of Stress**

Most Wisconsin farmers have experienced prolonged stress over the past 15 years attributed to plummeting land values, droughts and floods, low milk prices, and severe weather conditions. In addition, the farming industry is being required to produce more food to feed an ever expanding population forcing farmers to continuously improve processes and expand production adding to the heightened stress levels. At the same time, farm help is reduced as family members are forced to find outside employment to secure health insurance. Farmers are often working longer days alone, isolated from others. Social interaction with others or the community has declined over the years due to the hectic farming lifestyle. One farm wife stated, "We got into farming for what we thought would be a wonderful family lifestyle. Boy, were we wrong."

The effects of these stresses are different for every farm family. But many experience a combination of anxiety, sleep disturbances, exhaustion, anger, depression, substance abuse, withdrawal from others, marital and family problems, as well as cognitive and self-esteem problems. It creates a situation where harm of self and others is a real possibility. Suicide rates among farmers are 1 ½ to 2 times more likely among farmers than other men in our society.

### **Cultural Barriers Preventing Farm Families from Getting Help**

There are a number of barriers that keep farm families from seeking help:

- **Rootedness** – (often the third and fourth generations of farmers on the land) can keep families from choosing a different career
- **Work ethic** – causes them to work longer hours, milk more cows, farm more acres, avoid vacations, and take off-farm work to supplement income,
- **Self-reliant spirit** – keeps them from reaching out for help or limits helpers to a close knit network of family and friends; farm women do not see many community organizations as supportive in keeping their families healthy including local physicians, government and schools.
- **Attitude toward communication** – causes families to hold things close to their chests
- **Pride** – farmers are reluctant to seek counseling for anxiety, depression, angry outbursts, alcohol or other mental health or interpersonal problems.

Sources: Successful Farming, Feb 2003; farm family plunge, June 2002, “The Health, Mental Health and Safety of Wisconsin Farm Families”, Roger T. Williams, UW Madison; Farm Women Focus Groups, Summer 2002)