

“I have dirt in my veins”

by Kelley J. Donham, DVM, director, Iowa's Center for Agricultural Safety and Health

As a pork producer and farmer, have you ever gone to your doctor and realized they have no idea what your work and life is like? Don't you think it would be better if they did? Could they not make better recommendations for you that fit what you do and what you need? Well, we have been trying to train providers to be able to serve the pork producing and farm population better.

One of the important functions of Iowa's Center for Agricultural Safety and Health is to teach and train health care providers about the anticipation, diagnosis, treatment and prevention of health and safety problems they encounter in their farm patients (Agricultural Medicine). The usual curriculum for health care providers usually contains little or no information on this subject. In the past couple of decades, we have trained well over 1,000 doctors, nurses, physician assistants, veterinarians and a whole host of different species of health providers on the subject of agricultural medicine. Most of these providers are located in rural communities and are commonly utilizing this information to better understand the industry and recognize and treat health problems of farmers and their families. In addition to introductory training in agricultural medicine, we have extended training in Rural Health and Agricultural Medicine, offered as a 40-hour continuing medical and continuing nursing education course, or a three-graduate-credit course. Further we have a relatively new graduate masters, PhD or Certificate in Agricultural Safety and Health.

Those who take the course become extremely enthusiastic, and totally engaged, leaving the course with a mission of serving the agricultural population with the new knowledge they have acquired.

As there is very little training of this type offered in other places, we initiated a program two years ago called “Building Capacity” with funding from the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health. Our objective is to work with surrounding states to develop capacity within their states/region to institute sustainable training programs of their own area. As this Iowa program has become widely recognized, we have people from far distances that come to this program. In early June, we had 37 health care providers and veterinarians and students from Iowa and 10 other states, plus Canada, Australia and Finland. We delivered the program in Vermont this past fall to about 40 health care providers. In my introduction to the training, I asked why they were there. One woman, a physician and dairy farm wife replied readily “...it's simple, I have dirt in my veins.”

I knew instantly what she meant. She meant that she was tied emotionally to agriculture – that is the processes of producing food and fiber and connected to the culture of the people who do the work. Consequently, this training and what she must do is a mission, not a job.

We see this phenomenon frequently in those who have been born and/or raised on a farm or otherwise have had substantial contact with agriculture. They have dirt in their veins. Where did this dirt come from? The famous physician and science-based fiction author Michael Crichton (who passed away recently), waxed eloquently about the possibility of “genetic memory.” An analogy of genetic memory and dirt in the blood could go something like the following. About 12,000 years ago, our ancestors put down their spears and bows, and settled down from a hunter gatherer society and picked up a hoe and began farming. Those who farmed best lived to pass on that genetic information to the next generation. That multiplied over generations until we had a society that had “dirt in their veins.” Mike Rosmann, PhD (director of Agriwellness) indicates that this dirt in the veins remains in many people who may have left the farm generations past. Even if people have left the farm, if one puts these people back on the farm for a few years, the dirt in the veins comes back, with all the passion. Witness the many “new” people in alternative agriculture, and those moving back to the country for retirement or lifestyle change. These people may have spent a career in a white collar job in a city, but found the calling to reinvigorate the dirt in their veins.

The connection to this story is that we work in a world where fewer and fewer of our citizens, organizations and government officials have forgotten the dirt in their veins, and funding for agricultural health programs becomes a hard sell. In Iowa this past year, we have had six deaths in farm children and 38 adult farmers have lost their lives in the line of their work. Losses of this magnitude happen yearly in agriculture, and is a much greater health problem than the much hyped 2009 novel H1N1 influenza. Still, the mission of I-CASH is challenged by budget cuts. This year will be an even more difficult challenge because of the expenses related to the 1000-year flood we had this year, and the economic downturn.

However, I, as many other of our I-CASH family, have dirt in my veins. Every morning on getting up, we seek to advance our mission to do the best that we can to “help keep farmers, their families and farm workers alive and well in agriculture.” This year and the next few years, as we climb out of the current economic challenge, it will take all of the dirt we have in our veins to keep our efforts alive and the resources to sustain them. We have a job to do, so let's roll up our sleeves and get on with farming for the health and safety of our people.