Neurobehavioral Health of Farm Families

by Wayne T. Sanderson, PhD, CIH

Farm work often involves use of chemicals, such as pesticides, fertilizers, fuels, and solvents, which may be toxic to the nervous system. Exposure to high levels of these chemicals is known to cause acute neurological toxicity (such as loss of balance, memory loss, inability to perform simple mental tasks, nausea, and dizziness), but the effects of long-term, low levels of exposure are less well known. To study the effects of exposure to these chemicals, we have incorporated neurological testing into the third round of the Keokuk County Rural Health Study (KCRHS). This part of the study is being led by Dr. Fred Gerr of the Occupational and Environmental Health Department in The University of Iowa College of Public Health.

Study participants are asked about their historical use of pesticides (especially organophosphate and carbamate pesticides, organochlorine pesticides, fumigants, and chlorophenoxy herbicides which are known to be neurotoxins) fuels, and cleaning and degreasing solvents. We also ask about the duration, frequency, and intensity of exposure to these chemicals as well as the use of protective measures such as gloves, respirators, aprons, or coveralls. Total exposure and relative intensity of exposure are estimated using measurable goals, and drive improvements in safety and health for workers in their sector.

The next edition of the new NORA, including the latest iteration for the agriculture sector, is scheduled to be posted for public comment soon. Visit the NIOSH website at www.cdc.gov/niosh/nora/comment/public to submit your comments and suggestions.

The NORA Symposium 2008: Public Market for Ideas and Partnerships will advance the emerging sector-based action plans by encouraging discussions and partnerships among researchers and occupational health professionals in all types of organizations. A virtual conference will be held for those who cannot attend the Symposium in person on July 29th in Denver.

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The Agricultural Occupational Health Training to be held June 9-13, 2008 in Iowa City, Iowa. Nurses, physicians, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, and other interested health care providers are invited to participate. The Training provides information and skills to enable the health care professional to function in the anticipation, diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of occupational illnesses and injuries in the farm community. The course may be taken for three graduate credit hours from the University of Iowa College of Public Health, and continuing education credits for physicians and nurses are offered. The training brochure is available on the I-CASH website at www.public-health.uiowa.edu/icash. Contact Kay Mohling at 319/335-4219 or kay-mohling@uiowa.edu for more information.

Farm Safety 4 Just Kid’s Spokesperson and Founding President, Marilyn Adams, has been named one of the top three winning heroes in the 6th Annual Volvo for Life Awards. Adams is being recognized in the program’s Safety category and will receive a $100,000 contribution at the awards ceremony in New York City on March 19, 2008. During the ceremony one overall Grand Award winner will also be named “America’s Greatest Hometown Hero” and will be presented with a new Volvo every three years for the rest of his or her life. The Volvo for Life Awards, launched in 2002, is the largest-ever national celebration of everyday heroes in the categories of Safety, Quality of Life, and Environment.

The AgriSafe Network, partnering with the GPCAH, is offering a series of presentations using the web-based Elluminate program. Upcoming AgriSafe Elluminate Sessions include: AgrAbility-Farming or Ranching with a Disability, April 30th, presenters are Taylor McLean and Mary Beck, National AgrAbility Project; Risk Management in the Agricultural Workplace, May 14th, presenter is Bruce Johnson, Farm and Ranch Safety and Health Administration, British Columbia, Canada. To learn more about these programs e-mail Stacey at sjenkins@agrisafe.org or visit www.AgriSafe.org

Abstracts are being accepted for the Sixth International Symposium: Public Health & the Agricultural Rural Ecosystem. Submission procedures are available at http://pharesymposium2008.usask.ca/abstracts. The deadline is April 2, 2008.

Neurobehavioral Health continued

this information. The neurological function of people exposed to these materials is compared to that of unexposed people.

Participants in the KCRHS study 12 years of age and older are invited to take a battery of neuropsychological and neurological tests. The tests assess function of both the central nervous system (brain and spinal cord) and the peripheral nervous system (all nerves outside the central nervous system that serve the limbs and organs). Participants grip a dynamometer as hard as they are able to assess neuromuscular strength. Computer-assisted neuropsychological tests are administered to evaluate a wide range of central nervous system functions. The tests assess motor speed and coordination, perceptual-motor speed, general verbal intellectual ability, conceptual tracking, immediate and delayed memory, sustained attention, and mood. As an example, participants are shown a shape on the computer screen and then asked to find that shape among an array of other shapes as quickly as they can. They are also given a list of words and then asked to repeat as many of those words as they can recall.

These simple tests have been used in epidemiological studies of persons occupationally exposed to nervous system toxins and they have been shown to be sensitive measures of neurological impairment. This work in the KCRHS is one of the first studies to evaluate the general neurological health of rural residents and investigate whether impairments are related to agrochemical exposures.

Dr. Wayne Sanderson directs the Great Plains Center for Agricultural Health, housed in the Department of Occupational and Environmental Health of the College of Public Health. He can be reached at 319/335-4207 (wayne-sanderson@uiowa.edu).
Online Safety Courses for Grape Growing and Wine Making Industry
by Dan Neenan, Manager, NECAS

The National Education Center for Agricultural Safety (NECAS) in partnership with Northeast Iowa Community College (NICC) has developed and will be offering two safety courses for the grape growing and wine making industries. These courses will be delivered in an online format within NICC’s Associate in Applied Science, diploma, and certificate programs. The safety courses are being developed as part of NICC’s partnership with the Viticulture and Enology Science and Technology Alliance (VESTA). Other colleges in the VESTA consortium include Missouri State University (West Plains, MO), Rend Lake Community College (Ina, IL), and Redlands Community College (El Reno, OK).

Viticulture Safety is a one credit course addressing issues related to vineyard safety. The course will cover topics such as machinery safety, pesticide application, and personal protective equipment. Enology Safety is a two credit course addressing issues related to winery safety. The course will cover topics including fall protection, confined space, and ergonomics. Both courses will be available Fall semester 2008.

For course information contact Dan Neenan 888/844-6322 or neenand@nicc.edu. The VESTA website is http://vesta-usa.org.

Gunderson Presents at Seminar

Dr. Paul Gunderson engaged students and faculty with his presentation including observations and future directions for agricultural safety and health during the Occupational and Environmental Health Seminar on February 26th. The archived Elluminate session is available at http://globalcampus.uiowa.edu. Click on “recordings” and “calendar” for February 26, 2008. The program name is “OEH Seminar - Dr. Paul Gunderson, NAS Review of NIOSH Ag S and H.”

Dr. Gunderson chaired the panel that recently completed its comprehensive review of NIOSH’s internal and external agricultural safety and health programs over the past 15-plus years.

His career exploring the health impact of human activity in agricultural work settings began in 1976 with research work in poultry barns. He is the past director of the National Farm Medicine Center and the Marshfield Medical Research and Education Foundation. He is also a current member of the External Advisory Committee to the Great Plains Center for Agricultural Health.

Visit www.cdc.gov/niosh/nas/AgForFish/review.html for additional information about the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) review.
Agriculture (AFFH*) and Total Work Deaths
Upper Midwest Region

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| Work Deaths 2003-2006 | 319 | 809 | 324 | 317 | 670 | 103 | 190 | 120 | 413 |
| % AFFH | 37% | 12% | 18% | 26% | 23% | 48% | 34% | 41% | 25% |

**All 2006 BLS CFOI data is preliminary.

For more information contact Murray Madsen, murray-madsen@uiowa.edu or 319/335-4481