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***Farmsafe Toolbox Talks – Transcript of Podcast #15***

***'Tackling Farmer Mental Health Through ifarmwell' with Associate Professor Kate Gunn, ifarmwell***

***Host: Dr Richard Franklin, James Cook University***

***Guest: Associate Professor Kate Gunn, Founder, ifarmwell***

**Voiceover:**

“Welcome to Farmsafe Toolbox Talks, a podcast series focusing on farm culture, leading to a healthier and safer working, living and playing environment. Here's your host, Richard Franklin.”

**Dr Richard Franklin:**

“Today's podcast is brought to you by Farmsafe Australia under funding from the Australian Government, Department for Agriculture, Water and the Environment. I'm your host, Richard Franklin, and today we're exploring mental health with Associate Professor Kate Gunn and ifarmwell program she's developed and delivered across Australia. Mental health is a significant national issue and unfortunately, suicide rates are higher in farming males than non-farming males, including in rural areas. Farming faces a unique set of pressures and early detection can help you cope with the challenges of life. ifarmwell is a free online toolkit to help farmers cope effectively with life's challenges and get the most out of everyday regardless of the circumstances they face. Our guest today is Associate Professor Kate Gunn, who developed the ifarmwell. She's also an enterprise fellow in allied health and human performance at the University of South Australia and leads a team who carry out psychology, behavioral science and public health focused research on rural health, farmers mental health, and psycho oncology, and suicide prevention. She grew up on a farm near Streaky Bay. She has won various awards such as the Channel Nine Young Achiever of the Year Award, a South Australian Tall Poppy Science Excellence Award, and the Rural Remote Innovation Award, a commendation in the national Bupa Health Foundation Emerging Health Researcher of the Year Award. And she's also a Churchill Fellow. It is awesome to have you here today, Kate, congratulations on all your awards.”

“But let's talk a little bit more about you and how you ended up where you are now and doing the work that you're doing.”

**Kate Gunn:**

“Thanks, Richard. Yeah, well, as I said, I grew up in a family farm near Streaky Bay and my family have been farmers on both Mom and Dad's side for generations. So, I guess it's in my blood. But when it came time to leave school and work out what I wanted to do, I wasn't really sure. I knew I wanted to help people, but I wasn't really sure how best to do that. But I enrolled in psychology, and it's interesting now that kind of psychology's led me back to where I began, focusing on helping farmers.”

*Committed to keeping you safer on Australian Farms*



**Dr Richard Franklin:**

“Yeah, that sounds really great. So, what type of farm was it at Streaky Bay that you came from?”

**Kate Gunn:**

“It's a mixed farm. So, grain and sheep as well - so lentils, wheat, barley, peas, canola – bit of a mix.”

**Dr Richard Franklin:**

“It's a beautiful part of the world. And I'm sure you try and get back there as often as possible.”

“So yeah, we're talking about mental health and it's a really serious issue. And we know that it's a massive challenge across the board. What got you looking into it in the first place? What tipped you off that that something needed to be done?”

**Kate Gunn:**

“Yeah, well, back in 2008, when it was - we were in the middle of a really bad drought in South Australia. And I was doing my Honours in Psychology. And I needed a topic and the most obvious topic I could see in my world was trying to understand farmers mental health during drought. And I went around to a few professors. At the Uni I was at and tried to get someone interested in supervising that topic. And unfortunately, a lot of them said ‘no, I don't know if that's really something that's worth doing’. And I got a lot of knock-backs. And I think that's actually one of the best things that could have happened to me, because it just made me more and more determined to pursue the issue and help people who live outside of rural areas understand the importance of these sorts of issues. And in the end, I came across a lovely Professor Deb Tambo, who said, ‘Look, I don't know anything about this, but you seem pretty keen and I'll give it a go’. So, and actually Deb's a complete convert, and she's still working with me today, 15 years later, helping with the ifarmwell work.”

**Dr Richard Franklin:**

“That is a wonderful story and I'm glad you kept it up, because I think the ifarmwell is a fantastic program. I've been through the material, haven't done the program myself, but I really love it. I love the name of it as well. And well, I'll ask you how you came up with the name. But tell us a little bit more about what it is? How it works? And you know what you're trying to achieve from it?”

**Kate Gunn:**

“Yes, so something that's really important in this kind of work is ensuring that it fits the needs of the people that we're trying to help. So, we developed ifarmwell from the ground up, and we went out to Australian farmers and asked them, you know, if we were to develop something like this, what would it...what would you want it to look like? What language would you want it to use? What information would you want on there? And how would it need to work? And based upon that information, we then took the next step of combining that with evidence-based psychological strategies. Then we went back to the farmers and said, ‘Hey, this is what we've come up with - what do you think? And we designed it, you know very much hand-in-hand with farmers, which I think you can see in the way it's presented. It's pretty real. And the

examples are relevant to farmers and yeah, and hopefully it's as engaging as it can be. So, the way it works is you jump on there and you have to register and the reason for that is because when you answer questions, then the information that is presented to you in subsequent modules is all tailored to you personally and based upon the answers that you've given. And then you put in your mobile number and the reason for that is because farmers said they wanted a program that not just, they didn't just use themselves, they wanted something to reach out to them, and to remind them to keep practicing these things. So, so you get text messages as well, and you do a 30-minute module. And then you go away for a couple of weeks, and you get the text message reminders. And then, then you come back and do the next module. And all the skills kind of build upon each other. And in the fifth module, it all sort of summarises it all, and helps you work out the way forward from it."

**Dr Richard Franklin:**

"Yeah, I really like it. I like that you worked with farmers to kind of bring it about and the language is, I think, very inclusive. The way that you put it together as part of that process. And the mobile phone number and the follow ups and checks...look at sounds really great. So, they're five modules, right? And a person works through this, how long does it take them to kind of work through? And how long should people allow to kind of get in and do it? Do you have to do it in one go? Or can you do it over a period of time?"

**Kate Gunn:**

"Yeah, good question. So, on average, it takes people about 30 minutes per module. And you can start and stop as often as you want. And that was something a farmer said, you know, they might pull up in their ute and wait for a bin to unload and have five minutes to do a bit. And then they wanted to be able to come back and keep going later. So, it's designed to help them with that. The first module is largely a bit of a checkup. So, it gives you some feedback on how you're currently traveling. And it asks a lot of those questions, which then help tailor the content moving forward. And it gives practical tips on challenges that you might be facing. So, if sleep is an issue for you, or to give you strategies for that, or relationships, or whatever it might be, it gives you information on those specific issues. And then the second, third and fourth modules, introduce you to a series of tools that help change the way that you relate to your thoughts so that they have less power over you. Because we know a lot of farmers spend a lot of time on their own, and they have a lot of time. You know, if you're driving a slow mob of sheep, for example, it's really easy to get stuck on difficult thoughts in your head. So, it's really practical strategies to help deal with those thoughts and get a bit of distance from them. And then there's also a module around helping you work out what your priorities in life are, and where you're currently spending your time and effort. And then where it would actually be perhaps most rewarding to be spending more of your - your focus and your energy. And then there's a module around how to get out of your head and be more present. So more in the here and now. And we know that's a really powerful place to be and kind of a calmer, easier place to be. And then the fifth module, as I said, kind of summarises it all and works out how you can continue to use these strategies moving forward."

**Dr Richard Franklin:**

"That sounds really good. And I think it is one of the real challenges about being in your own head, right? And how do you get out of it? And I know with a number that I've talked to, they sit on tractors for hours on end, and the thoughts go around and build up and build up. And so, I think it's a really nice way of kind of working through and I guess, do you need, like a big bandwidth, like from an internet perspective to do it? How is it set up from a technical perspective?"

**Kate Gunn:**

“Yeah, that's another good question. So, if that's something that farmers emphasise, but it we need, you know, we all know that in rural areas internet's not as great as it could be. So, yeah, it's designed so that it hopefully works with as low of a bandwidth as possible. Having said that, you know, I'll admit it doesn't, there are places that it won't work. But that's an ongoing challenge for a lot of a lot of issues in this industry, isn't it?”

**Dr Richard Franklin:**

“And, yeah, absolutely. I think it's really great that it's online, I guess, you know, there is a bit of a stigma around mental health anyway, which we absolutely want to break down. It can happen to anybody at any time. And I think getting in and doing the program early and having those strategies in place really kind of helps set you up for those...those other times, and those other key stresses. So, can we talk a little bit more about when people might be at risk? And what are some of those kinds of stresses that you saw come through from your research?”

**Kate Gunn:**

“Yeah, sure. So, I guess there are various times that people are at risk. You know, in periods of drought, research has shown that, you know, that adds to people's stress. We also know, you know, after fires, for example, people are more at risk of distress. But more generally, you know, in times of financial hardship or relationship breakdown, they are times people struggle as well. And our research has shown that younger farmers, so those probably, you know, less than 25, can be at heightened risk, as well as those older farmers, so over 65. So, I think as...as farmers get closer to retirement, that can be a really challenging period that's not often acknowledged. So, you know, we know that farmers' identities are often largely caught up in their farm and their farm work and when that might be coming to an end, and, you know, it can be a time when people feel a little bit like their identity is threatened. So yeah, I think farming is a wonderful career but...but it's not easy throughout and at different ages, we experience different challenges.”

**Dr Richard Franklin:**

“Yeah, really good point there about the age that it's not just older people. It's not just younger people. It's across the board. And I think, again, as we said, getting prepared and doing some of these modules will really, I think, help people kind of work through it. I, you talked about drought, I guess also other kinds of extreme weather events that we're likely to see more of, and certainly over the last couple of years seen lots of flooding going through and the impact that that has both on...on your stock and your cropping...sort of what's going on as well. So, you kind of came about and decided to develop this program. But why are farmers kind of seeking out professional help? I mean, what's...what's going on there? Did you get any insight into...into the challenges there? And what we could do around that?”

**Kate Gunn:**

“Yeah, well, I guess one of the reasons I was motivated to do this was because people in my own community, farmers in my own community, were saying, ‘Oh, I'm a bit worried about this person, but I'm not quite sure, you know, what we should do for them’. And in that particular community, at that time, you know, services were lacking. And even people with quite severe mental health issues were struggling to get in to see someone. So, you know, there's all these people sort of in the middle who I knew, as a psychologist would really benefit from some of these strategies, but because of waitlists and things like that it was hard for them to, to get the access. So that's why I thought, ‘Well, why don't we just

kind of make this freely available so people can do it, when and where they want?' So, we didn't actually send it to a lot of research around what are the barriers to people using these sorts of resources. And what we found is that it's actually not only health system barriers to farmers accessing health, there's actually farm related barriers as well. So, you know, this notion that the farm always comes first and farm work is never done, those...that obviously gets in the way makes it hard for people to seek help at times. And perhaps even more than that, attitudes and beliefs can make it hard as well. So, you know, farmers are very independent, and as a rule, they value their independence. And I guess one of the challenges with that is that when it comes to mental health issues, sometimes these are things that you can't actually solve yourself. And so that that is something that we're trying to help more people understand - that independence can be great and solving problems yourselves is great in some circumstances, but there are also times when you do need to reach out for help. And I think also this attitude of 'I don't want to be seen to complain', or, you know, 'there's people worse off than me' that they're all attitudes that farmers tell us, you know, get in the way of them seeking help, but often when they do make that step and realise the benefit, they then become advocates for other farmers to do the same thing."

**Dr Richard Franklin:**

"I'm glad you brought up the issue around advocates. So obviously there's been lots of success stories and people kind of working through. Can you just talk me through a little bit about how people are finding it and the benefit that they're getting out of it and what you're hearing from your end?"

**Kate Gunn:**

"Yeah, sure. So, we've done quite a comprehensive evaluation of the modules, and we found that farmers who do them, their levels of distress go down, and their levels of well-being increased significantly. And most importantly, those gains are maintained six months after they've done the last module. So that's really important. It's one thing to change your behavior or change the way someone thinks. But to be able to do that on an ongoing basis is really cool. So, from a psychological research point of view, we're really happy with those results. And then sort of the qualitative stories that people tell us are really motivating as well. So, I think for a lot of people, it has given them hope, when they felt really stuck, and they didn't know what they could do. It's given them a confidential, free way that they can feel like they're doing something to improve their own life, which is...there's lots of stories of it being quite impactful. But I guess the challenge is to get more farmers to see value in spending 30 minutes of their time doing this and, you know, life is so busy for everyone. And this, as I said, you know, farm work is never done. But I think if we can get more people to spend this 30 minutes, investing in their mental health, what it can actually do is lead to much safer farms. Because if your mind is on the job, you know, you're likely to operate machinery, for example, far more safely. And it can also, if your mind is on the job, you're actually a lot more efficient as well. So yeah, there's lots of benefits, but we're still getting there in terms of sharing them."

**Dr Richard Franklin:**

"Great call out there. I think early on, I said it's available across Australia. I should double check. Is that the case that anybody can do it across Australia?"

**Kate Gunn:**

"That's right. Yes."

**Dr Richard Franklin:**

“So, we want more farmers to do it. Are farmers also coming back and doing it a second or third time as part of the process or have got some other thoughts around that?”

**Kate Gunn:**

“Yeah, look as a rule, they don't need to. I think some people come and revisit what they've already done. You know, once you...once you've kind of worked through the stuff, you've got a toolbox at the end, and you can go back to that toolbox and remind yourself of any of the strategies. But you don't really need to work through the whole thing again, because by the end of it, all your...your toolbox is completely tailored to you and your values and the thoughts that you tend to get stuck on, and the strategies that you found helpful. So, you choose what goes into your toolbox, which people seem to really like.”

**Dr Richard Franklin:**

“Yeah, sounds like a really great strategy. And obviously, something everybody can tailor to their own needs and where they're at in life and things that are going on. But we're nearly out of time. But I just wanted to follow up. I talked about you being a Churchill Fellow. What did you get up to on your Churchill fellowship? And how was that a benefit to the work that you're doing at the moment?”

**Kate Gunn:**

“Yes, sorry um, I guess I do two areas of work. One's farmer mental health and the others is trying to look at how we can improve outcomes for rural cancer patients. And the reason a psychologist is interested in that is because a lot of the things that impact upon cancer outcomes are actually attitudes, again, around seeking help, or going to cancer screening, or if you're traveling for treatment, for example. So my Churchill was looking at ways around the world, people are effectively engaging rural people in optimal cancer care, and trying to bring some of these strategies back to Australia to improve outcomes for people here, because we know that people who have cancer and live in a remote part of Australia are 35% more likely to die within five years of that diagnosis compared to someone with exactly the same disease who lives in a major city. So, there's lots of rural health issues to work on but that was a pretty cool experience. And, and some of the things I learned in the Netherlands in particular around what they're doing with online interventions have been...been able to be directly applied to improve ifarmwell. So, it was helpful for...for all of our work.”

**Dr Richard Franklin:**

“That sounds fantastic. And I would encourage people that have got a burning desire to do some overseas travel and learn more to do a Churchill fellowship. They're fantastic. And it sounds like both a great opportunity, and it's come and fed back into the work that you're doing. Look, thank you very much for being here today, Kate, really appreciate your time. I do encourage people to go out and check out the ifarmwell, and do it if you're a farmer. And, you know, get involved with obviously looking after your own mental health as part of it. You know, we did talk about some of those challenges, not just about accessing it, but I guess that stoicism that kind of comes from that 'she'll be right, mate' type of attitude. And certainly, we know that with a little bit of help you can go a long way. So, thank you very much for all the work that you've





done on it. For those that are interested the websites [www.ifarmwell.com.au](http://www.ifarmwell.com.au). Otherwise, you can visit [farmsafe.org.au](http://farmsafe.org.au). Thank you very much for your time, Kate.”

**Kate Gunn:**

“Thank you, Richard.”

**Dr Richard Franklin:**

“If you are concerned about anything that we discussed today, or feel that someone is struggling or might be thinking about suicide and you aren't sure how to talk them, you can always call lifeline on 131114.”

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**Voiceover:**

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