

Injured Farmer Dramatizes Safety Seminar

BY BOB STRONACH

BATAVIA, N.Y. — A local beef farmer attending the recent FARMSAFE seminar here got up and gave a few words of advice to the 100 people in the audience: Keep the guards and shields on farm machinery, and don't work alone.

The farmer, Leo Bolas, knew what he was talking about. Just six months earlier, he got entangled in a power take-off shaft. It snagged a torn pocket on his coveralls, the 67-year-old farmer said, and grabbed him with such force that it chopped his leg off below the knee before the PTO jammed to a halt. Luckily, he said, he had a penknife in his pocket which he used to cut himself free. Then he had to crawl to a telephone to summon help.

Bolas, who was getting around with a brand new artificial leg and a crutch, was reacting to a talk on PTO injuries by William Field, Ed. D., agricultural safety specialist at Indiana's Purdue University.

Field was one of four featured speakers at the seminar, organized by a medical research team from Bassett Hospital in Cooperstown and partially funded by Eastern Milk Producers Cooperative. An initial grant from the New York State Labor Department made it possible to hold the series of four Farmsafe seminars. The New York State Grange also provided some monetary support.

Field told the audience that he has "seen over 100 serious injuries in the past two years" and that he has "looked at over 800 tractors" in his visits to farms. Over half of the tractors, he added, had the master shields removed.

He said that on almost every farm he visits, he comes across a piece of machinery that doesn't have a safety shield. Just as often, he finds damaged shields that are of questionable safety.

"You've all seen that on farms," he told the audience.

When he asked how many had hooked up a PTO shaft in the past week, over a third raised their hands.

The common denominator in "80 percent of the accidents," Field said, was a lack of a guard or shield. Farm workers, he said, just don't seem to realize the exposure to danger that power machinery represents.

"Combat is not as dangerous as farming," Bolas added, noting he made it through 11 months of combat in World War II, "but almost got killed on the farm" when he lost a finger to a corn-picker 20 years ago and his leg to a PTO shaft last fall.

Field, who is also involved in helping handicapped farmers readjust to farm work, concluded his morning talk with a dramatic demonstration of the damage that an unguarded PTO shaft can cause. The audience moved outdoors where a tractor was hooked to a small mower. A lifesize dummy stuffed with newspapers was placed near the PTO shaft. When the engine was started, and the gear engaged, it only took a split-second for the dummy to burst and wrap around the spinning shaft. Its stuffing scattered in the wind.

Neil Winch, a vocational-ag instructor from a nearby school district, recalled the time he was lucky enough to only have his clothing ripped off by the PTO.

"Did you tell your students about it?" Field asked him.

"That's why we're here today," Winch replied.

Field also spoke later in the day on the economic impact of farm injuries, citing intangible costs, such as reduced ability to care for oneself and reduced self-esteem, as well as the numerous tangible costs, such as medical bills, rehabilitation and lost work time.

Agriculture is second only to

mining as a hazardous occupation, he said.

"Based on data we worked with," Field noted, "we suggest that accidents cost American farmers approximately \$2.5 billion a year."

About 1,500 died in farm accidents last year, he said, and another 5,000 suffered disabling injuries.

Dr. David Pratt, director of pulmonary medicine at Bassett Hospital, opened the day-long seminar with a presentation on respiratory hazards on the farm. Dr. Pratt and fellow physician Dr. John May co-direct the Bassett Farm Safety and Health Project. Both have received national attention for their research involving 240 farms in Otsego County.

Alarmed by their findings of a 25 percent injury rate among farm workers, and encouraged by their diagnosis of respiratory ailments among farm families. Pratt and

May organized Farmsafe to create a heightened awareness of hazards on the farm.

Pratt said that in their research they "discovered something" they hadn't encountered in their medical training — Organic Dust Toxicity Syndrome, also known as Silo Unloader's Syndrome. It is a temporarily debilitating condition that often results in hospitalization for three or four days. Occurring most frequently in late summer and fall, Silo Unloader's Syndrome is caused by exposure to bacteria-laden dust or mold that is sent spewing into the environment when uncapping silage. Frequently there is a delay before the onslaught of symptoms, which could include fever, tightness in the chest, cough and headache.

They found it to be a relatively common ailment among farmers, Pratt said. They also found that it "is nearly always misdiagnosed" as a form of pneumonia or even

Farmer's Lung Disease. "Doctor's just don't understand the farm environment," he said.

Bed rest is the best therapy, he added, and even though the condition is temporary and apparently without lasting effects, it is vital for farm workers and their families to take precautions, if only for the economic impact of losing three or four days of work.

Farmers can safely reduce exposure by wearing masks, running the blower and pressurizing the head of the silo, wetting down silage before unloading, and placing a plastic cover on the silage to reduce the amount of mold that builds up.

As common as Silo Unloader's Syndrome is, Farmer's Lung Disease is just as rare, according to Pratt.

Farmer's Lung symptoms are similar to those of Silo Unloader's Syndrome, he said, but while chest x-rays and white blood cell count

are usually normal with Silo Unloader's Syndrome, they are very abnormal with Farmer's Lung Disease.

Because Farmer's Lung is an allergic reaction to heat-loving bacteria in dust and mold, not everyone is susceptible to it.

"We're talking about a disease that is relatively uncommon in New York," Pratt said, "and...that is a true allergy."

But if a farmer does contract Farmer's Lung, the good news is that it can be reversed — if caught and treated properly — without the individual having to give up farming.

Initial treatment may involve drugs and, for a short period, complete removal from any dusty environment on the farm. Then, once the allergy is under control, the farmer can gradually return to work wearing a mask and other forms of respiratory protection.

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