



Discussion groups support health and safety adoption

Regular, brief, discussions of health and safety issues should be on all discussion group agendas

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Farming is high-risk work, with a fatality rate greater than that of other occupations. Given the many “hats” each farmer must wear, it is essential that they are supported to reduce the risk of illness, injury and death for themselves, their families, and any staff they employ.

The farm risk assessment document has been shown to support adoption of good occupational safety and health (OSH) practices, and physical changes on farms to reduce risks.

Another OSH promotion strategy that has worked in other occupations, including healthcare, policing and construction, is peer-to-peer exchange of knowledge and practices in OSH-focused discussion groups.

Teagasc facilitates about 800 discussion groups across all farm enterpris-

es. Discussion groups enable farmers to share practical solutions and, through the rotation of “host farm”, see what strategies other farmers have implemented and how well they have worked.

Research

With support from Teagasc and the Health and Safety Authority, research was undertaken to investigate the outcomes of promoting OSH in farmer discussion groups. The research drew on the experiences of dairy discussion groups in Kildare and Offaly that had made health and safety part of their monthly agenda.

When the study was initiated in 2016, there were 301 Teagasc dairy discussion groups, with 4,669 dairy farmers, representing 29% of Irish dairy farms.

A key finding was that 96% of the 96 discussion groups participating discussed health and safety at least once in 2016. This was before the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine “Knowledge Transfer” programme, which required groups to take part in OSH promotion activities. The majority of the discussion groups focused on the causes of fatal farm accidents.

A number of important issues, including those related to chronic illness, such as sun and ear protection,

received limited attention.

Based on these findings we determined to develop standardised discussion strategies. A collaborative design approach was taken, engaging farm advisors and knowledge exchange experts from Teagasc, to ensure the approaches developed would be engaging and feasible.

Two discussion approaches addressing four separate health and safety topics were examined. One in which the groups discussed all the topics in a single group meeting and the other in which groups covered one topic per meeting, for 20 minutes.

A number of advisors reported that groups enjoyed the “little and often” approach. Furthermore, the discussions were appealing to farmers in different life stages, and with different farming strategies and business performance goals.

Regardless of the number of years of farming experience a farmer may have, the farm performance and farm size, many of the risks farmers face within a particular enterprise will be the same.

The critical difference between life and death is how those risks are managed, and strong support networks that promote effective risk management, such as discussion groups, can help farmers to invest in preserving life and health.