



## **SUICIDE AND PESTICIDE EXPOSURE AMONGST SOUTH AFRICAN FARM WORKERS: A PUBLIC HEALTH PROBLEM**

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Suicide is a mental health problem and is a major public health issue in South Africa, where suicide rates are reported to be rapidly increasing. The Medical Research Council's Non-Natural Injury Surveillance System recently reported suicide accounted for 10% of all non-natural causes of death.

### **Research**

A SANPAD funded project in the Western Cape Province has shown that farm workers and residents are particularly vulnerable groups, as they have ready access to pesticides. Suicide rates amongst Western Cape farm workers and farm residents are considerably higher than among the general population and that of other countries.

Pesticides ingestion is a common method of suicide amongst farm workers and farm residents, who are, respectively, 5 and 8 times more likely to use pesticides to commit suicide than non-farm workers and residents.

Pesticides are also an important cause of acute and chronic poisonings amongst rural farm residents in South Africa. Farm workers are exposed to pesticides on a daily basis when they working. Those involved in the application and mixing of pesticides are at greatest risk of exposure, but it is also evident that all farm residents are potentially at risk of exposure from spray drift or contact with chemical residues on crops and trees.

### **The issue of pesticides is an urgent one because:**

- The use of pesticides in South Africa has increased substantially, and
- Preventive services in terms of mental health and safe usage of pesticides for farming communities are very limited and inaccessible.

### **Recommendations**

Government and policy makers are urged to:

1. Prioritize education about the hazards of pesticide use, and their safe utilization.
2. Provide more support to mental health services by setting up a). support services for families with mentally ill persons, b) counselling services for those who have attempted, or considered suicide and c) health promotion strategies for farming communities, with an emphasis on mental health
3. Develop stronger policies on access to and use of pesticides in South Africa. These policies should ban the most hazardous pesticides which



would decrease the risks of exposure to end users and the public.

4. The agricultural department needs to look at the options for reducing pesticide use, such as encouraging organic agriculture and/or the use of less toxic pesticides.

