

Abstract

Supporting farmer wellbeing: exploring a potential role for farm advisory staff

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Abstract

Introduction: Farmers in Ireland experience poor health outcomes and are considered 'hard to reach'. Agricultural advisors ('advisors') are uniquely positioned to support and signpost farmers on health issues. This paper explores the acceptability and terms of reference of a potential health role for advisors, and offers key recommendations for developing a bespoke farmers' health training programme.

Methods: Following ethical approval, eleven focus groups ($n=26$ female, $n=35$ male, age-range 20s–70s) were conducted with farmers ($n=4$), advisors ($n=4$), farming organisations ($n=2$) and farmers' 'significant others' ($n=1$). Utilizing Thematic Content Analysis, transcripts were coded iteratively and emerging themes were grouped into primary and subthemes.

Results: Our analysis identified three themes. 'Scope and acceptability of a potential health role for advisors' examines how participants envision and are receptive to such a role. 'Roles,

responsibilities and boundaries' considers both a health promotion and 'health connector' advisory role – normalising health conversations and signposting farmers to services/supports. Finally, 'trouble-shooting potential obstacles to advisors assuming a health role' reflects on the barriers that may impede advisors capacity or potential to have a broader health role.

Discussion: Within the context of the stress process theory, findings provide unique insights into how advisory can mediate stress and contribute to farmers' health and wellbeing. Finally, findings have important implications for potentially extending the reach of training to other aspects of farming support services (eg agri-banking, agri-business, veterinary services etc.), as well as serving as a springboard for the development of similar initiatives in other jurisdictions.

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