



Agricultural Injuries Pose Unique Problems

What constitutes a disabling injury in agriculture? Disabling injuries are defined as those that result in at least a half day of lost work time. In most industries, the injured worker would initially be treated by a nurse or fellow worker and then transported to a doctor or emergency room for additional treatment. For example, a worker who slips and falls at work may sustain a severe back strain and could miss several days of work during recuperation. This is a well-defined and understandable disabling injury.

But agriculture is unique, especially when it comes to farming and ranching. Let me explain with an example from my own family. While still a youngster working with my uncle on his Pennsylvania farm, I observed him drop an extremely heavy object on his foot, crushing his large toe. The toe immediately swelled to at least twice its normal size, and my uncle found it necessary to provide his own version of first aid. This included finding an old pair of work shoes and cutting out the toe area with a sharp knife so that his injured toe could protrude. No further treatment was rendered.

Is this a disabling injury? I would suggest that in any other workplace, this injury would have been classified as disabling and would have resulted in considerable lost time for the worker. The difference between agriculture and other industries is that the injured farmer may be the only person who is available to do the farm chores. Sure, other family members can pitch in when they get home from school or from another job off the farm, but the bulk of the work is being done by the primary, full-time farm operator.

I have often stated during public presentations on farm safety and health issues that I believe that the reported rate of disabling injuries is grossly underestimated. In other words, the 150,000 injuries the National Safety Council reported in 1999 is most likely considerably higher – possibly double the report rate. However, my uncle was no exception: he had to play with the cards he had been dealt, and if that meant working with the pain and discomfort, then so be it.

Preventing these disabling injuries is a huge job for agricultural safety and health professionals. They must develop awareness programs that reduce the level of carelessness and complacency. And this is no easy job. Farmers are convinced that a serious incident, injury or death will not happen to them. But the incidents continue to occur, and there is always more work to be done.

For more information on farm safety and health, contact Dr. Sam Steel at the National Safety Council, (800)621-7615, ext. 2023.

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