

## Southern Agcare: working as a mobile rural psychologist

Helen Byles-Drage, Southern Agcare

### ABSTRACT

Southern Agcare is an independent, non-profit, mobile counselling service operating within the 16 Shires of the Central and Lower Great Southern in Western Australia. Long drives are part of the job for Southern Agcare counsellors and are useful as thinking or relaxation time.

Starting 15 years ago as a self-help group its success led to Government funding and the employment of professionally trained counsellors. Additional support comes from funding and in-kind donations from the Shire Councils, by contract counselling, and by client donations.

Southern Agcare is headed by a Management Committee of local people dedicated to the welfare of the population with in the region, who meet bimonthly. It operates on a shoestring budget and prides itself on providing a no-frills grass roots service. All the counsellors have a rural background and a wide understanding of rural issues. They are local people who have trained and returned to their home area to work.

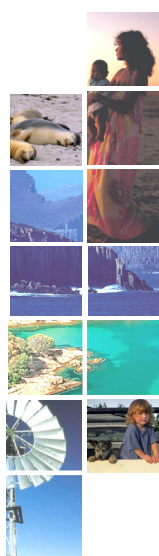
Southern Agcare employs four Family Counsellors to provide personal, couple and family counselling or mediation. Home and car provide their office and they work in Health Centres, hospitals, DCD offices and client homes. They provide a wide range of therapy (about half their work is couples counselling), run workshops, liaise with many organisations, and sit on a variety of committees.

The Department of Community Development (DCD) funds three Family Counsellors. In a new development, South Agcare has contracted with the Commonwealth and WA Health Departments and the Great Southern Division of General Practice, to provide psychological counselling in the southern section of the Rural Community Support Service (RCSS). After some initial hiccups, it was found most efficient to allow this counsellor to work within Southern Agcare guidelines while reporting back to the RCSS on a regular basis.

Southern Agcare employs two Financial Counsellors who provide budgeting and advocacy for people in financial crisis. They maintain offices in Albany and Gnowangerup but much of their work is carried out in the homes of farmers and business people.

Southern Agcare shows its absolute support of the counsellors with bi-monthly social meetings, ongoing staff training, and monthly supervision sessions with their own independent counsellor. These are appreciated and help with bearing the workload.

The services of Southern Agcare are in demand and growing at about 30% a year. People *like* to go to an independent service. They appreciate effective counselling and





reasons for which the clients have presented. No individual details are given. Confidentiality is essential for rural people to have the confidence to present for counselling.

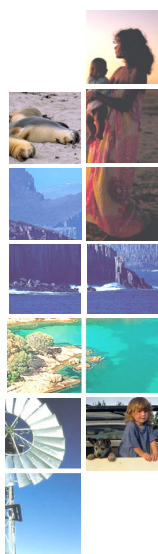
Southern Agcare employs four Family Counsellors. Social worker Dot Bailey works three days a week within the Shires of Gnowangerup to Jerramungup and south to the coast. Social Science graduate Pearl Draper works from Dumbleyung to Lake Grace and Lake King. I am a psychologist providing a counselling service two days a week through the Shires of West Arthur and Wagin south to Kojonup and Broomehill. Family Counsellors are funded by the Department of Community Development (DCD), which keeps track of our doings through our bi-monthly reports and six-monthly appraisals of our standard of service.

In a recent development psychology graduate, Lyn Davy, is employed to provide counselling from Denmark on the south coast to Gnowangerup and Jerramungup. South Agcare has contracted with the Commonwealth and WA Health Departments, with the support of the Great Southern Division of General Practice, to provide counselling for the southern areas of the Rural Community Support Service (RCSS). The RCSS is a new organisation established to provide counselling for rural people throughout the Great Southern. Based in Narrogin, it is headed by a co-ordinator and has five counsellors. An RCSS psychologist is employed in the Upper Great Southern; two counsellors based in Katanning cover the Central Great Southern, Lyn and a clinical psychologist work the southern area. It can be seen that the two organisations compete for the Central and Lower Great Southern. In practice, we have found there is enough work for everybody. On a continuum from early intervention, through moderate to severely mentally ill, the RCSS slots in ahead of Southern Agcare, which provides much in-depth therapy.

Southern Agcare and the RCSS are still learning to work together. There is benefit from being part of a bigger team, with more expertise on hand. A recent improvement has been changing the mode of referral to contacting Lyn directly and attendance at intake meetings is no longer required, which assures client confidentiality.

Pearl lives in the hamlet of Broomehill, Dot lives on a South Stirlings farm, Lyn and I live in Albany, and we are a mobile service, so the office for Family Counsellors is house and car. Rising fuel prices, car maintenance, and insurance costs and lower trade-in prices mean that Family Counsellors now try to limit home visits. We work out of local Hospitals, Health Centres, and D.C.D. offices, travelling a circuit each week.

Southern Agcare employs two Financial Counsellors through funding from the Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Department (AFFA) and the Agriculture Dept of WA Financial Counsellor Chris Wheatcroft works from an office in Gnowangerup in the centre of our region, and David Poultney in Albany on the south coast. For many of David's clients it is convenient to visit him as part of a shopping trip to Albany so he travels less than Chris who handles the northern half and often works from client homes. Chris drove 70 000 kms last year but long drives are part of the job for all of us, often in excess of 500km weekly.



## SERVICES PROVIDED

Southern Agcare provides a service for anyone living outside the city of Albany. The Financial Counsellors assist with budgeting and advocacy for people in financial crisis. The Family Counsellors provide a wide range of therapy for everything from stress and anxiety through depression and family problems. Approximately half our work is couples counselling. We regularly attend training seminars to update our knowledge and skills. Although much of our work may be in small towns and hamlets, we all have a rural background and a wide understanding of rural issues. We grew up on farms, married farmers, or had our own farm or rural business.

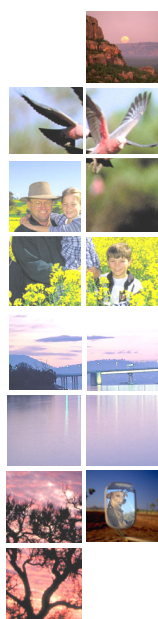
As well as counselling, Southern Agcare counsellors provide workshops, liaise with organisations and sit on a variety of committees. We provide seminars and workshops on an as-needed basis. For example, one Shire called us in to debrief a hamlet, which was in shock after a respected local person committed suicide. Nearly 40 people attended this meeting and they spoke at length and asked many questions. They asked us to return and run workshops on communication, depression and on medication. We ran the follow-up session a fortnight later with similar attendance numbers. An example of our committee work is that most of us belong to various inter-agency committees in the larger centres where we lobby for assistance and maintain contact that prevents duplication of effort. A lesser-known part of our work is finding funds for emergency relief work or distributing food parcels to stricken areas. We support the soup kitchen run by the Denmark Community Collective which keeps us in touch with the 60 to 150 people who visit it each Wednesday evening.

Southern Agcare supports its counsellors. Social meetings are held bi-monthly where staff training and briefing takes place, followed by a meal and a chat. Southern Agcare also provides for its counsellors to attend monthly supervision sessions with an independent counsellor of their own choice. This is greatly appreciated and helps with bearing the workload.

The services of Southern Agcare are in demand and growing by 30% a year. People like to go to an independent service. They appreciate effective counselling and figures show that for individual counsellors 30–50% of referrals come from the individual or his family or a friend, closely followed by Doctors and Allied Health workers. The referral process is deliberately kept simple – anybody can pick up the phone and make a referral. This places demands on the counsellors who, with calls coming in seven days a week, all use an answering machine to gain some private life. It can also be difficult for clients to realise that a mobile counsellor will not be at home to take their call and they need to use the answering machine. The mobile phones we all carry are likely to be switched off during sessions or out of range as we travel.

All the Family Counsellors have similar intake rates. In the last two years and a half years I have taken on 400 new clients. I have also run workshops on everything imaginable, Parenting Skills, Relationships, Adolescence, Stress Management, Anger Management, Pain Management, Depression, Suicide, and Grief.

As you are well aware, there is a rural crisis, now of many years standing. Clients do not generally present saying that the stress of running a business or of farming is getting them down. More often, they present stating that the wife has left and they are devastated. They may present saying that they are feeling depressed and anxious all



the time. When they describe what went wrong, their problems with the seasons or their business interests shows up as one of the contributing factors.

The western areas where I work have had a good season but the eastern areas of the Great Southern are suffering from drought and frost. A series of ongoing crises in rural industry has impacted badly on all areas. Businesses are failing and farmers are carrying increased debt. Towns and hamlets are fighting to keep Government utilities and private contractors. In this situation agencies like Southern Agcare can provide counselling, run workshops, and support the locals in their fight to survive> They can help them cope with loss and work towards viewing moving as opening up new opportunities.

## CONCLUSION

Southern Agcare is popular and successful and does not generally need to advertise or promote its services. The workload for the Secretary and Treasurer is considerable. The organization has reached a point where it needs to make a decision whether to hold at the present level or enlarge and take on clerical staff or more counsellors. To do this it needs to ensure ongoing Government support.

At the end of service, clients are asked to complete and forward, in a prepaid envelope, an assessment of their satisfaction with the service they received. Many years of largely laudatory responses suggest that we are doing something right. While this success comes from the dedication of all involved with Southern Agcare, the value of employing professionally trained local people ensures continuity of service, and the enthusiasm and support of the Management Committee maintains the enthusiasm and loyalty of the staff.

## PRESENTER

**Helen Byles-Drage** combines the roles of wife, mother, stepmother, and grandmother with a full-time career. Originally she had a first life of 25 years with the WA Education Department as a rural primary teacher, Deputy Principal and finally specialist on problem children. She has twice been the wife of a farmer (now retired to beautiful Albany) but also farmed in her own right and she followed a pattern of external studies that saw her achieve four educationally oriented diplomas over the 25 years. She then entered Murdoch University and completed the four year B Psych course.

Helen has worked as a psychologist since 1991, firstly with the severely mentally ill for the Richmond Fellowship, evenings retraining incest offenders for SAI.F. This was followed by two short contracts with Community Mental Health in the Eastern Goldfields and three years working for the then Ministry of Justice as a prison psychologist.

In 1996 Helen moved into private practice and finally retirement. Finding retirement neither personally nor financially rewarding she completed a Masters at Charles Sturt University Wagga Wagga, and has worked as a rural mobile psychologist for Southern Agcare since October 2000. Sixty-three years, young she is currently trying to cut back on clinical work and commence a doctorate.

