

FARM INJURIES TO CHILDREN IN THE UNITED STATES

Frederick P. Rivara, MD, MPH

Professor of Pediatrics and Adjunct Professor
of Epidemiology, University of Washington

Director, Harborview Injury Prevention and Research Center

April 10, 1990

Address inquiries to Dr. Rivara at the Harborview Injury
Prevention and Research Center, 325 Ninth Avenue, Seattle,
WA 98104 Phone (206) 223-8388 Fax (206) 223-8471

Agriculture is the most dangerous occupation in the United States. Although farmers and other agricultural workers account for less than 3% of the work force, they suffer over 14% of the work related deaths. Most alarmingly, the problem seems to be worsening. Since 1948, deaths in mining have decreased by two-thirds per 1,000 workers while deaths in farming have actually increased. In Wisconsin, for example, the death rate among farmers has increased by 40% in the last 25 years.

Agriculture is unlike other occupations in that children make up a significant part of the agricultural work force and are exposed early, and often tragically, to its hazards. Children less than 14 years of age make up 19% of the farm population. Many of these children are employed by their parents; many more accompany their migrant families and work alongside them as seasonal laborers.

Each year in the United States, more than 25,000 children and adolescents are injured on farms and nearly 300 die. These children are the group at highest risk of death; their rate of fatal injury compared to farmers of all ages is 26% greater.

The source of these serious and fatal injuries is the same as it is for adults: agricultural machinery. Agricultural machinery and tractors account for less than 15% of the minor injuries occurring to farmers, but account for 70% of fatal and serious injuries. In contrast, animals

account for very few fatalities, but a sizable number of minor injuries.

Tractors are the piece of equipment on the farm accounting for the greatest number of serious and fatal injuries to both children and adults. Overall, they account for only 8% of all farm injuries, but are responsible for one-third of all farm fatalities and over one-half of farm machinery related fatalities. Tractor injuries and fatalities represent a failure of regulation. Three fourths of these fatalities are due to overturns, in which the individual is not protected by a roll over protection structure (ROPS). Although these devices have been available since 1959, current regulations require them only on OSHA inspected farms in which there are more than 10 non-family employees. Thus, most farm workers in the US are currently unprotected. This must be contrasted to a country such as Sweden where these structures have been required on all tractors since 1983. As a result, there is only an average of 1 tractor overturn fatality per year in Sweden, in contrast, for example, to 30 per year in the State of Wisconsin.

Children are also the victims of other types of farm injuries. The power takeoff device is an ubiquitous attachment to tractors. Unfortunately, it presents a dangerous hazard as an unprotected shaft rotating at 100 RPM. Children standing next to the machine get clothes

entangled in it resulting in amputations, strangulations, mutilation and death.

A similar hazard is presented by grain augers. These screws rotate at a high speed allowing material to be moved up the tube at 400 ft/minute or 7 ft/second. Body parts get caught in the tube and are amputated before the child has a chance to react to the danger.

The problem of farm injuries is compounded by the rural location in which they occur and hence the decreased access to medical care. More than one-half of the children who die from farm injuries do so without ever reaching medical care. Another 19% are dead by time they are brought to a hospital emergency room. Only 7% of children even live long enough to receive inpatient care.

The central reason for this large and serious problem of childhood farm injuries is the double standard in labor legislation. Attitudes toward legislation regarding child farm labor lag far behind those in other areas of the market place. Under the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, 12- and 13-year old children may be employed on any farm with the consent of their parent. Minors younger than 12 years may be employed on any farm where employees are exempt from the federal minimum wage provisions; this includes hand-harvest laborers paid piecework and migrants employed on the same farm as their parents. The law also expressly allows the child to be exposed to hazardous farm machinery: "Minors of any age may be employed by their parent or person standing

in place of their parent at any time in any occupation on a farm..."

These federal regulations are in marked contrast to those applying to non-agricultural occupations, in which the minimum age is usually 16 years. For example, adolescents 14 and 15 years of age are specifically prohibited from employment in manufacturing, an industry that has one-tenth the death rate of agriculture. Minors younger than 18 years are prohibited from hazardous occupations such as using power driven woodworking machinery even when the minor is employed by the parent.

This double standard appears to be economic in origin. Children in non-farm, especially manufacturing, industries are viewed as threats to the adult labor force; in agriculture, children instead are seen as cheap sources of labor. As recently as 1977, the Fair Labor Standards Amendment provided for the agricultural employment of 11-12 year old children in hand harvesting of short-season crops when, "without 10 and 11 year olds, the industry would suffer severe economic disruption."

Child farm labor is a problem in which we have tolerated for too long conditions which are reminiscent of the last century. The time has come for a change in our attitudes, our laws and our treatment of the children of rural America.