

18 JULY 2018

DEAR FARMERS

What makes an issue travel from your mind to your heart? What makes something you know in your head so important that you have to change how you do things? That you want to do it. That you need to do it. That you do it? What is it?

I'm asking because I'm not a farmer and I'm struggling with this. And I need your help to understand. So I can help.

On Sunday 25th June I and many others attended the Embrace FARM remembrance service in Abbeyleix, County Laois. This is the fifth annual event to remember those killed and seriously injured in farming accidents in Ireland. Tragically the list of those affected increases every single year. The same conversations take place every single year. It's awful. It's heart-breaking. It's frustrating.

I watched families grieve for loved ones all over again. Where all memories come flooding back. I watched families display enormous courage on what was such a difficult day for them. Where all the family photographs have someone missing. Where children carry feathers to the front bearing the name of the loved one they've lost. I am in awe of these families and their strength and dignity in such heartache.

It got me thinking. These families get it. They have been touched so directly that nothing will ever be the same again. They know in their hearts that this has to stop. They would do anything to turn back the clock.

But what about those farm families who were not there that day? Do those families have to wait until they are touched until their hearts break? Surely no-one thinks the only solution to changing behaviour is to wait until tragedy strikes?

Please tell me. What needs to happen to turn the head knowledge into heart action?

More tragedy? No, we're past the point that numbers and personal testimonies have enough impact on their own. More awareness of the dangers? No, awareness has never been higher. More money? No, the causes of most of our farming tragedies are not down to money. More leadership? No, I believe Northern Ireland farming leaders have stepped up to the plate on farm safety.

I don't think it's more. I think it's less.

Less focus on what can't be done. Less focus on things being too much hassle. Less excuses. Less assuming that nothing can be done. Less flippancy about near misses. Less thinking it will never happen.

To those of you who get it and have made the change, thank you. You are leading by example and saving lives. But the question is the same. What is it that made the difference? Please share it so we can discuss and learn from it.

We can do lots of stuff – predict the causes of the injuries. Investigate incidents. Ask people to STOP and THINK. Make TV ads. Visit and advise. Take enforcement action. Make generational change through schools and young farmers.

But I hope you know by now that only you can make you change. You have to want to change. You have to decide to change. You have to choose to get this from your head to your heart.

And then things will change.

As you ponder these questions I urge you to think about those families at that remembrance service in Abbeyleix. I urge you to come next year. Those families would do anything to change what happened. You have a chance to do that now, before it's too late.

Tell me what it takes. And I'll know better how I can help.

It's your health. It's your safety. It's your choice. Let's get a debate going about what it takes to make the change. From head to heart.

Thank you. Please farm SAFE.

KEITH MORRISON