



Dairy farmer Nathan Retzloff undergoes a free health assessment with Rhonda Strebil of the Wisconsin Rural Health Initiative. The initiative makes annual house – or barn – calls to farms.

Farm calls

Nurses deliver free preventative care to farmers

By Lindsey V. Corey

Jim Fuhrman will concede he “might be stubborn.”

And that “might” keep this fourth-generation dairy farmer from going to the doctor’s office for a routine physical.

OK, it has: “Unless I’m bleeding profusely, I’m just not going to take the time to get cleaned up to get there and wait for 20 minutes, thinking ‘heck, I could’ve been doing something else.’”

Jim’s not alone.

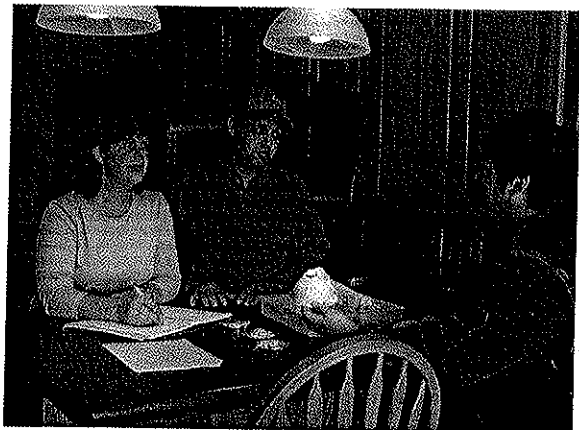
“These farmers care more about animal health than their own,” says Rhonda Strebil, Wisconsin Rural Health Initiative (RHI) executive director.

So the RHI nurse goes to the Fuhrman farm – and more than 200 others in Shawano County – every year.

Kitchen wellness

They call it kitchen wellness, although the health screenings, farm safety tips and referrals have been conducted in barns and even on a tractor.

“Aside from the convenience, it’s far more relaxing to be able to sit at your kitchen table to have your blood pressure taken and go through health questions,” Jim’s wife Diane says. “They’re easy to talk to. They grew up on farms and know what it’s like out here and that getting



Top: Diane and Jim Fuhrman get a dose of "kitchen wellness" and nutrition guidance from Rhonda Strebel of the Wisconsin Rural Health Initiative (RHI). Above: RHI has a booth at the Shawano Farmers' Market to raise awareness for its free services. Volunteer Sam Crawford, executive director Rhonda Strebel, Wendy Crawford and daughter Morgan help spread the word to other farm families.

these guys to go into a doctor is next to impossible."

In addition to that so-called stubbornness, farmers work long hours with unpredictable animals, large equipment and dangerous chemicals. They tend to be prideful and self-reliant, Strebel explains.

Those conditions, plus the stresses of unpredictable weather, little control over pricing their products and geographic isolation, compelled a group of concerned citizens and providers to create RHI nine years ago, she says.

Eighteen percent of farm families have no insurance, and four out of five don't have insurance that covers checkups and preventive care, according to RHI.

"We knew we couldn't fix insurance, but we asked what can we do?" Strebel recalls. "Hypertension, cholesterol and diabetes were three big concerns we could help with. But the farm women said screenings would be great, but the men aren't going to go. We had to remove the barriers of time, distance and money so

the wife doesn't have to fight to get them to a clinic."

Between-chore checkups

Farmers are used to what they need – from livestock feed to tractor tires – coming to them.

"So when I first started, I rode along with the vets and the milk man and supply trucks to get introduced," Strebel says. "They were already trusted people, and I would introduce myself and leave my contact information. Little by little, people started calling, and pretty soon there I was at their kitchen table checking their blood pressure between chores."

For the first few years, that was Strebel's job. But word of mouth spread and the program grew, so Dawn Dingeldein, a registered nurse and self-proclaimed "early bird farm girl at heart," was hired to handle farm visits so Strebel could focus on fundraising and coordination.

Adults in the home and on the farm undergo blood pressure, glucose and cholesterol testing and get results – that can easily be shared with nearby physicians – within 10 minutes.

"But I'm there as long as we need to be, no waiting because I get there on their schedule, and the only time they feel rushed is if they have chores that are calling them," Dingeldein says. "I can sit at their table and have a teachable moment about their lifestyle and start reading labels on packages of things already right there in their home, where they're most comfortable."

Diane has lost more than 50 pounds, thanks to advice on diet and exercise from Strebel, she says.

"A lot of farmers out here have grown up with a lot of cooking with butter and cheese, big portions or meat and potatoes," she says. "But the whole family has learned to cut down the size, to steam vegetables instead of covering them with butter and make better choices food-wise than I think we would have had we not been involved in the program."

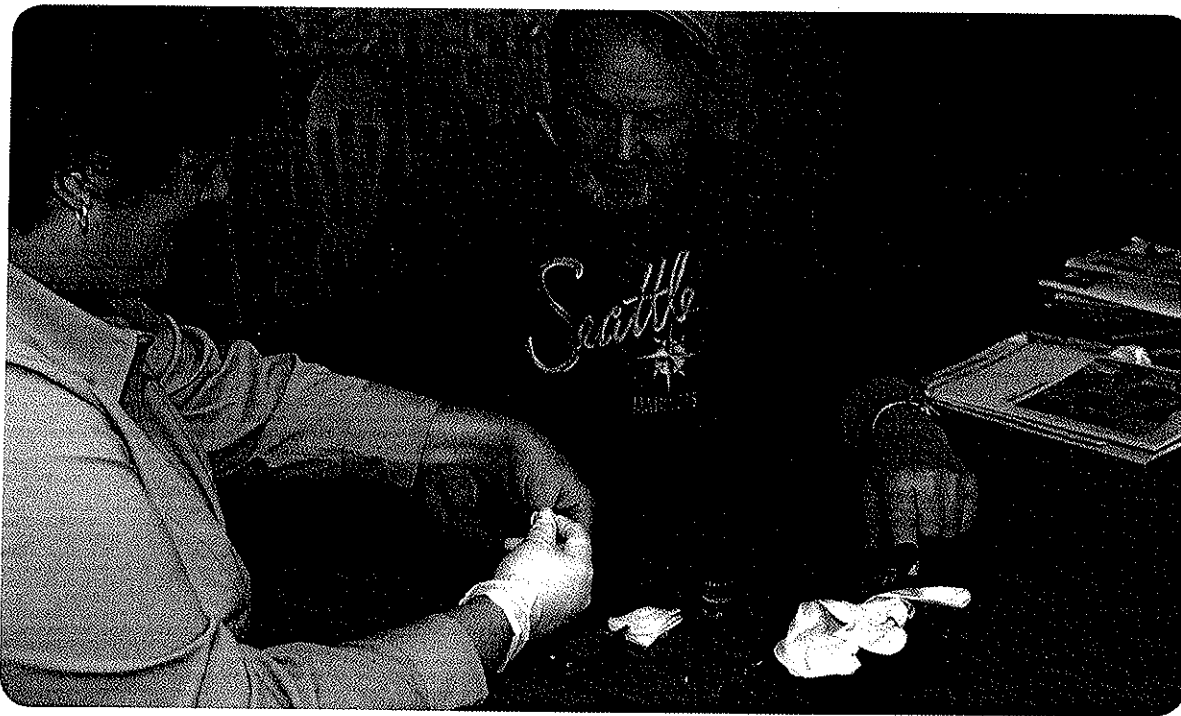
"Aside from the convenience, it's far more relaxing to be able to sit at your kitchen table to have your blood pressure taken and go through health questions."
Diane Fuhrman, Rural Health Initiative participant

At his annual kitchen table screening, Jim learned his cholesterol was a little high.

"She advised us on how to change our eating habits and what to stay away from," he says. "I'll admit I don't follow that like I should; I'd miss the heavy gravy, but I did see a doctor and go on medicine to help keep my cholesterol in check."

Open to all

About 325 families – or 40 percent of the farm families in the county – participate in the program in some way each year, and there are 200 farm



Rhonda Strebel checks Alvin Bartz' glucose levels during an annual preventative health visit to his rural Wisconsin farm.

visits with 400 to 500 individual screenings annually. Of those, Strebel says about half receive a referral, and 97 percent of those follow up on the referral with a physician like Jim did. Some call Dingeldein's house at night, but she doesn't mind.

"They see us as a very trusted source because of the relationships we've built," Strebel says. "We're finding at least 15 cases a year of something very serious that they had no idea was happening and another 45 cases of things that need some type of referral that they had no idea of. It's hard to measure what you prevented from happening, but we know we're saving people emergency room visits and possibly lives."

A local domestic violence shelter called Strebel when a woman decided to return to her farm.

"They knew once she went back, they couldn't have contact with her, so her and I set up a plan that if she called and said 'I need my blood pressure checked,' it meant that she needed help," Strebel says.


The woman eventually left her husband and now goes to Strebel's office for health checks.

Any adult connected to agriculture can receive RHI screenings and social services referrals at no charge. It took more than a year, but Strebel personally introduced Dingeldein to all of the people she'd visited.

"We see Amish, family farms, large dairies with Hispanic workers and their families, retired farmers, a grandma who lives in a house on the land. At one farm, we see four generations while there," she says. "It's for any farmer, not poor farms, so it doesn't feel like a charity or anyone is singled out."

Some of the farmers financially support the nonprofit initiative. Some give Dingeldein pickled asparagus, she says with a chuckle. Local health care systems, the public health department and agribusinesses provide the majority of necessary funds. And an annual fundraiser brings in about \$15,000.

In February, two neighboring counties – Outagamie and Waupaca – in Northeast Wisconsin and a part-time nurse for each were added to the program. Waupaca farm families hosted a barn dance that raised \$7,500 and helped spread the news.

"It was a dream come true to reach a point of success where other communities want to replicate what we do," Strebel says. "Agriculture is an important industry in Wisconsin. We need to give back to keep them healthy and safe." 

Nurses' chore list

Wisconsin Rural Health Initiative nurses visit farms to:

- Help farm families understand their health risks
- Provide farm and home safety assessments and information from sun protection suggestions and smoking cessation tools to CPR training and child development guidance
- Conduct cholesterol, diabetes and blood pressure screenings
- Provide information and referrals for:
 - health services in the community
 - social services, including counseling programs
 - programs to support agricultural needs
 - financial planning assistance opportunities

For more information, visit wiruralhealth.org.