

Episode Title: Farming the Message: Reporting Agricultural Incidents

Topic: Agricultural Injury Terminology Used in Media

Summary: In this episode, we explore the important role that terminology plays in how agricultural injuries and fatalities are reported in the media. Dr. Barbra Lee and Melissa Ploeckelman, from the National Children's Center for Rural and Ag Health and Safety in Marshfield, WI, stress the importance of using precise, consistent language that reflects the gravity of these incidents and respects the lives affected. The episode also touches on the impact of sensationalism and vague reporting, which can undermine the true extent of farm safety issues. By advocating for more thoughtful and informed language, the podcast aims to raise awareness and foster greater attention to the often-overlooked dangers of the farming profession.

Expert: Barbra Lee and Melissa Ploeckelman

Episode Quote:

"Child farm injuries are never accidents."

– Barbra Lee, PhD

Transcript

00:10 E Ritchie

Welcome to the *FarmSafe* Podcast brought to you by the Great Plains Center for Agricultural Health. In the blink of an eye, an injury can change your life and your farm forever. During each episode, we share first-hand stories and real-life tips for making safer and healthier decisions while on the farm.

00:32 E Ritchie

Accidents and incidents are terms often used in workplace safety and health discussions. While they may appear similar, it's important to understand their distinct differences— particularly when it comes to managing risks and maintaining safety in agriculture.

00:48 E Ritchie

Whether it's the use of specific terms about farming practices, machinery, or environmental issues, language plays a crucial role in shaping public understanding. But sometimes, the media oversimplifies or misrepresents key terms, leading to confusion about what's really happening on farms in our communities.

01:09 E Ritchie

In today's episode, we will be discussing the terminology used in the media when it comes to agricultural injuries and fatalities. While many may call these tragic events 'accidents,' it's time to change that narrative. Every injury, every fatality, can be seen as a preventable incident—one that could have been avoided with proper safety measures, training, and awareness. We'll discuss why shifting our perspective from 'accident' to 'preventable incident' is key to improving safety in agriculture and reducing the risks for workers on the ground.

01:48 E Ritchie

Joining us today are two experts, Barbra Lee and Melissa Ploeckelman. They'll help us navigate the nuances of the terminology used when reporting farm incidents and why it's important for the media to get them right. They'll share their insights on how certain terms can shape public perception, the risks of miscommunication, and how reporters can better serve both the farming community and the general public.

02:16 B Lee

My name is Barbara Lee, and I am a senior research scientist here at Marshall Clinic Research Institute. And I am the associate director of the National Children's Center for Rural and Ag Health and Safety. We're a NIOSH funded center here in Marshfield, WI.

02:37 M Ploeckelman

I am Melissa Ploeckelman. I am the outreach Center for the National Farm Medicine Center, as well as the National Children's Center for Rural and Agricultural Health and Safety located in Marshfield, WI.

02:50 E Ritchie

Really, I just want to kind of dive into the accidents versus incidents project and what that entails and just hear a little bit more about it.

03:02 B Lee

So, you commented about a project so it's not like a project with the start and end. It's sort of, I would say an initiative that we've been building interest on, and capacity and the ultimate goal is really to shift the culture of farm injuries and deaths in thinking of them more realistically as being predictable and preventable.

03:33 E Ritchie

How would you distinguish between accidents versus incidents?

03:40 B Lee

Well. And the thing is we say really there is no such thing as an accident. [*Libby— Right.*] And that whole shift in thinking became a public health issue. You know about 60 or 70 years ago when they realized that you could count these events, you could predict them.

03:59 B Lee

And the term accident for many people it sounds like it was an act of God. It was like you had no control over it, and we know that in virtually all situations there is some element of control. Well, very rarely is there something like completely out of, out of somebody's control. So, we know that the automobile industry made that shift back in the 70s where they stopped calling crashes. They stopped calling them motor vehicle accidents. And through their agencies, they pushed this change to, say, motor vehicle crashes, which then as a result, made it clear that somebody was responsible, somebody was accountable for something that could have been safer.

04:51 E Ritchie

What are the activities that you guys are doing? Are you in any way kind of measuring what the impact might be in that change in terminology? Is it just kind of the increase awareness that like— thinking about, you know, what did you do wrong in this situation?

05:03 B Lee

There's been a lot of different aspects of this in in my own work, in looking at legal cases where a child was fatally injured and there was legal action taken, and interviewing law enforcement people, they said that they rarely get involved because they think it's an accident and they couldn't have been prevented, but when they take that word out then they say OK, now we do need to get involved. And so, there's been efforts to work with people that are reporting events like law enforcement.

05:38 B Lee

We've had a lot of efforts recently and probably over 10 years to influence media reporters to avoid using the word accident. Three different specific projects have kind of dealt with that now. And other things that we're doing. And Melissa, you could comment on like social media, how you might take on an accident, so to speak, report and then comment about that on social media.

06:05 M Ploeckelman

Yeah, so when a report comes through and it's written by the media, a lot of times we'll see a title such as, "farm accident kills toddler." And rather than just reposting that exact title, we'll change the wording in our social media post to say something along the lines of "Losing a child— losing a child to a farm incident is devastating not only for the family, but for the entire community. Let's rally around the family during this hard time and make sure to prevent future incidents like this by not allowing children on tractors." So, taking the word accident out and using other words such as tragedy, incident, roll over— and that way just kind of reminding people that this could have been prevented, but also still showing that empathy that we feel for the family or the community that has lost someone that they love.

07:02 E Ritchie

And Barb, you mentioned you know when that term accident is taken out, that's when law enforcement, you know, can look into an incident. So, my question is, you know, with a lot of farms employing under— I think it's 11 people for OSHA to not be involved. Does that present any challenges?

07:24 B Lee

I don't know that that terminology would have a specific response. You know in those situations what we do know is that in some cases it's Child Protective Services that would be called in the things that are most concerning to me personally. Or when there's negligence, neglect. Just leaving kids alone in a dangerous work site or, you know, two parents trying to get the work done in a busy work site and just keep their fingers crossed that the child is going to be OK because they don't— either can't afford or can't find childcare. So, in situations of neglect, negligence or recklessness. Child Protective Services get involved if it's. If it's like a nonworking child.

08:13 M Ploeckelman

And when we bring this all full circle back to talking about the terminology when farm parents or farm supervisors read things that say tractor roll over caused fatality, immediately they're thinking of the youth on their farm driving a tractor and how they could be injured. When they just hear like farm accident kills teenager— well, then it was just, you know, it was just something that happened, and it'll never happen to me on my farm. But when we get those more technical descriptions, it keeps again farm parents and farm supervisors thinking about how can they prevent these things.

08:51 M Ploeckelman

So maybe we say, "bull attack," "Critically injured youth," or "Youth falls through a hay chute, lands on head." So, these are some real quick headlines that can really make parents and adults think about, OK, this is what actually happened and this is how I can now prevent that on my own farm.

09:13 M Ploeckelman

So, by changing that terminology in the media, hopefully it will even kind of reach farm parents and farm supervisors so that they too are not thinking well. That was an accident that happened to them. It couldn't happen to me because that was not preventable. Whereas usually if you read the media report, it was preventable.

09:37 M Ploeckelman

We recently had a conversation about sometimes media will use the word accident because it seems to have more of a punch to maybe a headline or a title, or in a report. But we would just like to share that there are other words that can be very impactful, such as using the word fatality or death. Those can be just as impactful using the words "Critical injury" can be impactful and so by getting rid of that word accident and using some of these other terms. Again, it helps us to all realize that this was preventable, and we can prevent it on our own too. Even though the word accident may seem like the only word you can use for a headline, there are so many other words out there, and we're happy to share some of those words if anybody ever kind of comes up short and needs some help.

10:31 B Lee

And the slogan for our work is "*Child Farm Injuries are never accidents.*"

10:47 E Ritchie

We've covered some really important ground in this episode, from the language we use when reporting on agriculture, to the crucial shift in mindset needed when it comes to farm injuries and fatalities. It's clear that accurate terminology not only shapes how we understand farming practices, but also how we address safety and prevent harm.

11:10 E Ritchie

For this episode, I want to ask our listeners to review recent farm incidents in your communities, or pay close attention to any new stories that arise in the next month or so. Consider how local media covers agricultural injuries and fatalities in your area. Reflect on how these incidents are framed, are they framed as preventable or accidental? Do you notice patterns in how these stories are told?

11:51 E Ritchie

As we wrap up, remember: when we call injuries and fatalities 'accidents,' we risk accepting them as inevitable. But by recognizing them as preventable incidents, we can push for safer practices, better training, and a more proactive approach to safety in the field.

12:10 E Ritchie

To learn more about the 'Accidents vs. Incidents' initiative, you can visit the Marshfield Clinic's webpage included in the resources for this episode. You can also read Dr. Barbra Lee's peer reviewed commentary, *Child Farm Injuries are Never "Accidents"*, published in the *Journal of Agromedicine* or check out the live and current press release, by clicking on the links provided in the resources.

12:34 E Ritchie

Listen in on the *FarmSafe* podcast to join in on the conversation about keeping safe on the farm.

We want to hear from you. Share your stories about health and safety issues on the farm, about injuries that made you change the way you work, or about the ways you keep yourself and others safe on your farm. Also let us know if there's questions you have or topics that you want to hear about on the air. You can visit our website, gpcah.org, or email us.

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Episode Resources

- [Child Farm Injuries are Never "Accidents" by Dr. Barbra Lee](#), Peer Reviewed Commentary Published in the Journal of Agromedicine
- [Child injuries on farms are not 'accidents'](#), Press Release
- ["Accidents" vs Incidents Webpage](#), Marshfield Clinic Research Institute

Photo

