

A handy farmsafe message

By HELEN WALKER

SPRINGSURE farm hand Mick Karl is living proof people should take the farm safety message seriously after spending his Christmas and New Year in a Brisbane hospital bed.

Mick, who works on Helen Downs in the Springsure district, is aged in his early 50s and has about 38 years of farming experience to call on, but he now has some urgent advice for those farmers who regularly grease a planter with a pneumatic (air-driven) grease gun.

Now with a missing finger and months of rehabilitation ahead of him, Mick laments how different things could have been had he donned a pair of welding or rigger gloves when using a grease gun or changing hydraulic lines.

It was in early December when Mick was greasing the planter with a grease gun and a nipple blocked. The hose he was holding in his left hand, blew, right where it joins the metal end that clips on to the nipple.

"A split second later my hand had been injected with grease at high pressure through a split no more than 5mm long just below the base of my

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"index finger," he said. "So next, it was into the ute, with my boss driving to meet the ambulance half way to Springsure, as we are about 50km east of the town, on the Rolleston road.

"Something I must say is, the pain of having a hand full of grease, under pressure, is something that you don't need to experience, it was excruciating."

Mick was taken to Springsure Hospital, and soon after flown to Rockhampton Base Hospital by the Royal Flying Doctor Service.

It just happened to be on a day when a crane had taken down the power lines at the hospital and the operating theatre was backed up.



Mick Karl's hand just after the accident at the grease injection site.

By Tuesday afternoon, he hadn't been seen by the medical team, so Work Cover and his boss transferred Mick into Hillcrest Private Hospital where he was operated on that night.

"The grease had infiltrated most of my hand from the first knuckle on my index finger to my wrist, so that is how long the incision was," he said.

"At the point where the grease had entered, the tissue had died and I ended up with a hole the size of a 50c piece down to the bone. The nerve to the index finger had a piece missing about 25mm long and couldn't be fixed, so the finger was numb, which was probably a good thing.

"My arteries had also been cut and were beyond repair, so the only blood supply I had to the finger was through the skin.

"The medics put a vacuum pump on the open wound and I went back to theatre another three times over the next 10 days to have it washed out to try to get all of the grease out.

"Apparently grease isn't easy to get out, and guess they can't use degreaser like we do on the farm."

On the fourth visit to theatre they closed most of the palm of the hand, just leaving the 50c piece sized hole at the entry wound, then transferred Mick to Greenslopes Hospital in Brisbane.



After the first operation, and the hand left open with vacuum pump on it.



After a fourth operation, Mick was transferred to Brisbane for a skin graft.



Mick Karl in happier times at Helen Downs, Springsure.

"I went in for surgery to have a skin graft, but they found more grease, and opened my hand up again and washed it out some more," he said.

"Then they cleaned the entry wound up and prepared it to receive the skin graft.

"The medical team were packing the wound and changing it four times a day for a week, trying to clean out any other grease that may have surfaced.

"Finally, the decision had to be made about the skin graft, which was

a full depth graft, not just a thin layer of skin.

"As the index finger was dying, the decision was made to remove it and use part of it for the graft."

Mick was then allowed home for 10 days with a splint on his arm so he couldn't move anything to upset the graft.

Then he went back to Greenslopes Hospital again to have it looked at and to make sure if the graft had taken.



Index finger removed and skin graft completed.

Mick will return to Greenslopes Hospital next Monday for the graft to be checked.

"Hopefully if all is okay I will be back to some light duties, and a bit of tractor driving," he said.

"I still have a lot of rehab to go, trying to get the use of my back, as everything is stiff because it has been immobilised for six weeks and we are all hoping I get full use of it again.

"However, if I had one piece of advice for everyone, it would be to yourself a pair of riggers' glove welding gloves to use when using a grease gun, or changing hydraulic lines.

"I know, everyone says you need gloves, and I too was on those people.

"After 38 years working on dozers, fishing boats, farms, and one injury, I was finally brought down by a shot of grease in the hand, which could have been prevented by a simple pair of gloves.

"I was lucky I guess, they managed to save my hand, but it was though might lose it for the first few days, maybe others may not be as lucky."

● Anyone wishing to know more about farm safety should visit www.farmsafe.org.au, or email info@farmsafe.org.au