

Sleep and Effective Farming Fatality File



Frank Cole was driving home from a party to his parents' home in Melbourne when he began to feel drowsy.

In the chilly early hours of Sunday morning, the 21-year-old had on the heater in his EJ Holden and was following his cousin's car.

But after a week working on a sheep farm, he was exhausted, and soon felt his eyelids getting heavy.

"I felt myself drifting off, then the next thing I knew I had wrapped my car around a power pole," Mr Cole said.

He was later to learn he had broken his neck and jaw and would need to spend months in hospital before he was well.

It is a stark reminder of the dangers of sleep deprivation, a condition that nearly cost Mr Cole his life, and which is becoming more common in the developed world.

The Chernobyl nuclear disaster of 1986 and the Exxon Valdez oil spill in 1989 have both been linked to sleepy workers.

"It is quite likely that sleep is serving an absolutely fundamental process," said Dr Amy Jordan, a sleep expert and senior lecturer at the University of Melbourne's psychology department.

"If you take rats and sleep deprive them continuously, they will die after about 20 days.

"It is not like they all die from heart attacks ... They actually die from complex and various reasons."