

Routine Jobs, Young Workers, Real Risk

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Karen had been working on the farm for about four months. She hadn't grown up on a dairy, but she loved being outdoors and was enjoying the work.

One afternoon, she was bringing the cows up the undulating laneway into the dairy yard for milking. Only a few stragglers remained, and one of the two gates at the back of the yard had already been closed by another worker.

Karen was on the quad bike. Wanting to save time and avoid getting off, she manoeuvred the bike alongside the open gate. Reaching out with some force, she grabbed the top rail and swung it around to close it. She finished the job by nudging the gate shut with the front of the bike.

With both gates together, she stood up on the footrests and leaned forward over the handlebars to fasten the chain clasp.

She noticed the gates now had a new chain and fastener – a big improvement on the old fencing wire that had previously been used. What she cannot clearly recall is how her right thumb slipped between the chain and the gate rail and became caught within the links.

Instinctively, she tried to free it with her other hand, releasing the hand brake to do so. Under normal circumstances that might not have been a problem –

except the quad bike's foot brake was not working properly. No matter how hard she pressed it, it would not engage.

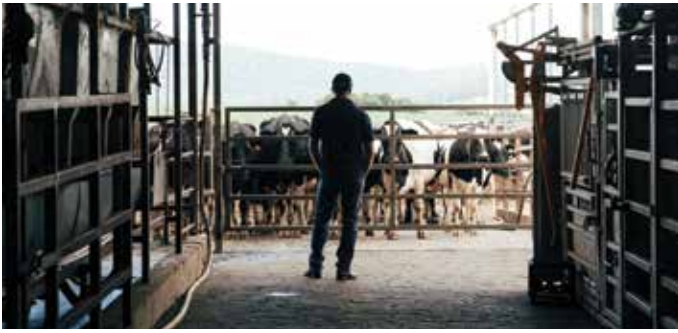
Because the laneway sloped slightly into the yards, the bike began to roll backwards. As it moved, the tension on the chain increased, crushing Karen's thumb and the base of her hand.

She was now trapped. If she held the hand brake, the bike would stay put – but it had already rolled back as far as her trapped thumb would allow. She found herself bent almost in half, stretched awkwardly over the handlebars.

She considered trying to get off the bike, but that would mean letting it roll away – something she worried her employer would not appreciate. She tried reaching under herself to press the accelerator, inching the bike forward slightly, but each time she stopped, it rolled back again. Her thumb remained firmly wedged in the chain.

After about 15 minutes, another staff member came looking for her and found her still trapped. He had to locate the boss for assistance – one person to stabilise the bike, the other to help Karen safely dismount, and then carefully work to free her thumb, which by that stage had turned a pale shade of blue.





Where Did This Go Wrong?

Karen's injury didn't happen because she was reckless. It happened because a series of small, familiar farm behaviours lined up at the wrong moment.

- She wanted to save time.
- She didn't want to get off the bike.
- She didn't want to look slow or incapable.
- She assumed the bike would stay stationary.
- She assumed it would only take a second.

Young or newer workers often have confidence — sometimes more than experience. They are keen to prove themselves. They don't want to be seen as making mistakes or holding others up. That quiet pressure can lead to shortcuts.

This incident wasn't caused by one bad decision. It was the combination of several contributing factors:

- Attempting to close and fasten a gate while seated or standing on a quad bike
- Wanting to save time and take a shortcut
- A new gate latch configuration — unfamiliar hardware
- Standing on the quad bike footrests while leaning forward
- A sloped laneway increasing the risk of bike movement
- A faulty or poorly maintained foot brake
- Limited experience (four months on farm)
- Lack of active supervision at the time
- Concern about employer reaction and fear of letting the bike roll away
- No clearly reinforced rule about dismounting before closing gates

Supervision on farms isn't just about showing someone how to do a task once. It involves:

- Reinforcing safe methods repeatedly
- Checking equipment condition
- Observing how the job is actually being carried out
- Creating a culture where stopping and doing the job properly is expected

Karen had only been on the farm for four months. She knew how to bring cows up. She knew how to shut a gate. But had clear expectations been set that:

- You always dismount the quad to close and secure a gate?
- Saving seconds is never worth increasing risk?

Of course, Karen should have been able to expect that the quad bike's brakes were safe and fully operational. Her hesitation about speaking up regarding faulty equipment highlights another issue — whether workers feel confident reporting defects without worrying about repercussions.

These conversations matter — especially with younger workers who are still forming their habits and learning what “normal” looks like on a farm.

Practical steps to prevent a repeat

1. Implement a clear rule: Dismount to close gates

Make it a non-negotiable expectation:

- Quad bike in neutral, park brake applied, engine off if required — get off the bike to close and secure gates.
- Write it into your Safe Work Procedure.

2. Equipment maintenance

- Ensure all quad bikes are safe and fully operational.
- Implement a simple pre-start checklist.
- Remove defective bikes from service immediately.

If the brake isn't right — the bike isn't used. No exceptions.

3. Young worker supervision

Workers in their first 6–12 months need:

- Closer monitoring
- Regular check-ins
- Observed task performance
- Reinforcement of safe behaviours

Not because they're careless — but because they're learning habits.

4. Culture shift: What are your expectations?

Make it clear:

- Getting off to shut a gate is expected.
- Taking an extra 30 seconds is not a weakness.
- Reporting faulty equipment is responsible behaviour.
- No piece of equipment is worth an injury — a hand injury is life changing.

Young workers especially need permission to slow down.

5. Remove the “Impress the boss” pressure

If a worker believes; “The boss won't be happy if I let the bike roll,” then we need to ask what signals are being sent about productivity versus safety. Supervision includes modelling calm and safe decision-making.

Karen was fortunate. While the injury was painful, it did not require any medical treatment beyond an ice pack and rest. Given the amount of time her thumb was trapped and the pressure involved, the outcome could easily have been far more serious — including fractures, nerve damage or permanent loss of function.

On dairy farms, it's often the everyday jobs — shutting gates, moving cows, riding quads — that carry the greatest risk because they feel routine. Familiar tasks can quietly lead to shortcuts, especially when workers are trying to be efficient or prove themselves.

This incident is a reminder that small decisions matter. Clear expectations, properly maintained equipment, active supervision and a culture where workers feel confident to slow down and speak up are what prevent injuries.

Because the next outcome may not be as forgiving. ■■



Further info

Young workers | [WorkSafe.qld.gov.au](https://www.worksafe.qld.gov.au)