If prostitution is the oldest profession, then agriculture is surely the oldest industry. It was the transition of man from hunter–gatherer to farmer that first enabled civilizations to develop and other industries to evolve. For thousands of years, the majority of the world’s population worked on the land, but nowadays most people live in cities, and the agricultural workforce in developed countries is shrinking. This has been possible because technological advances, particularly over the past 200 years, have made food production much more efficient. Mechanization has had an enormous impact, and other innovations, such as the use of agrochemicals and improved breeding of plants and animals, have also been important.

Many people who, as a consequence of this, enjoy the luxury of a plentiful supply of food are now questioning the pace of change. Fears are widely voiced about threats to health and the environment from pesticides, genetically modified crops, the use of hormones in meat production and other aspects of modern agricultural practice. In Britain, the BSE epidemic, and more recently a major outbreak of foot and mouth disease in cattle, have further focused public attention on these issues. In response, the government has initiated a major review of farming and of the rural economy more widely [1].

Caught up in the middle of these developments are the farmers and their employees, who must continue to earn a living while all about them is changing or uncertain. As well as psychological stresses, they face a range of chemical, physical, biological and ergonomic hazards in the course of their work. And because of the way in which the industry is organized, with most of the workforce employed in small businesses, access to occupational health services is limited.

Against this background, we have put together a series of papers reviewing various aspects of occupational health in farming. The focus is principally on agriculture in the UK, but much of the material will also be relevant to other countries.

Reference