

**Media Release**

## **Health sector to tackle Australia's hidden disability – fetal alcohol spectrum disorder**

**20 June 2011:** Australian health experts have stepped up efforts to reduce the impact of alcohol-related birth defects, with the launch today of a multi-pronged program including the first Australian service to diagnose this under-reported problem.

Known as fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD)<sup>1</sup>, these conditions are the most common, preventable cause of disabilities and brain damage in children, triggered by exposure to alcohol during pregnancy.

The Alcohol Education & Rehabilitation Foundation (AER Foundation) will fund the ground-breaking campaign, with Chief Executive Michael Thorn today announcing an investment of over \$500,000 into seven projects across Australia.

“Fetal alcohol spectrum disorders result in disability. A person is born with and lives with a disorder for the rest of their lives. Sadly, it’s both preventable and incurable.

“But because it’s an under-researched area in Australia, we still have no clear picture of its prevalence, with many cases going unreported. Through our investment we will provide a deeper understanding and much needed solutions to an issue that’s been left neglected for far too long,” Mr Thorn said.

A recent community poll<sup>2</sup> released by the AER Foundation found that 80% of Australians believe consuming alcohol while pregnant can be harmful to the developing foetus; and 72% believe drinking alcohol while breastfeeding is harmful to the baby.

“There’s still no known safe level of drinking for women while pregnant, with evidence from more than 30 years of research revealing that alcohol can be harmful to the developing foetus throughout the entire pregnancy,” Mr Thorn said.

The community poll also found that less than half of women who have been pregnant or breastfed recall having had a healthcare professional raise with them the harms associated with drinking alcohol (42%).

“It can be difficult to diagnose FASD because many health professionals aren’t adequately equipped with the right tools to recognise a person with FASD, or refer them to appropriate intervention services. A West Australian survey<sup>3</sup> of obstetricians found that almost half of the obstetricians (42.9%) didn’t routinely ask about alcohol in pregnancy and only 4.8% gave advice that was consistent with the NHMRC guidelines at the time.”

“One of the projects we’re funding will address this through the development of the first screening and diagnostic service for FASD in Australia,” Mr Thorn said.

The six AER Foundation-funded initiatives include:

- The Children’s Hospital at Westmead, New South Wales, will develop Australia’s first screening and diagnostic service for FASD (\$108,000 grant)
- The National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, New South Wales, will undertake a research study aimed at improving services for pregnant women dependent on alcohol (\$50,057 grant); and another study to help improve services to families affected by FASD (\$50,057 grant)
- The University of Queensland Centre for Clinical Research will carry out an Australian-first study into the knowledge and training deficiencies within the state’s criminal justice agencies in regards to FASD (\$63,560 grant)
- The Telethon Institute for Child Health Research will undertake an Australian-first research study into how young people with FASD are treated by the criminal justice system in Western Australia (\$50,000 grant); and another into the screening and diagnosis of children with FASD in state care (\$150,000 grant)

As part of the AER Foundation’s investment, The George Institute for Global Health has also been granted \$40,000 funding support to produce a feature documentary about the life of an Aboriginal child living with FASD; and an educational film about the broader issue of FASD.

“A major research gap which is only now being explored in Australia is the way people with FASD are treated by the criminal justice system. It’s particularly important to identify the support needed for our young people as they go through the legal system as either offenders, victims or witnesses.

“Children and teenagers with these disorders are left more vulnerable, with many suffering problems with learning, poor memory, difficulty self-managing their behavior, poor co-ordination and problems communicating<sup>4-5-6</sup>,” Mr Thorn said.

“The AER Foundation is addressing the gaps in FASD research and practice. The outcomes from these projects will provide much-needed support for people living with FASD, and their carers and families.”

Mr Thorn added: “Underpinning all this, we need to drive home the point that not drinking at all while pregnant is the approach endorsed by our medical experts and the Australian National Health and Medical Research Council Guidelines. If we don’t do something about this now, it will be too late for a generation of children who will be born into a life of disability as a result of their mother’s drinking.”

**References:**

<sup>1</sup>Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD) encompasses four conditions: Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS), partial FAS (pFAS), Alcohol Related Birth Defects (ARBD) and Alcohol-Related Neurodevelopmental Disorders (ARND).

<sup>2</sup>The AER Foundation-commissioned Galaxy study was conducted between 14th to 17th January 2011. It was national online survey (excluding NT) and was weighted by age, gender and location (based on ABS population estimates) to the national population. There were 1,009 respondents aged 18 years and above.

<sup>3</sup>Elliot E, Bower C. Alcohol and pregnancy: The pivotal role of the obstetrician, *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology* 2008; 48: 236–239.

<sup>4</sup>Fast DK, Conry J, Loock CA. Identifying fetal alcohol syndrome among youth in the criminal justice system. *J Dev Behav Pediatr.* 1999 Oct; 20(5):370-2.

<sup>5</sup>Fast DK, Conry J. The challenge of fetal alcohol syndrome in the criminal legal system. [see comment]. *Addict Biol.* 2004 Jun; 9 (2):161-6; discussion 7-8.

<sup>6</sup>Fast DK, Conry J. Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders and the Criminal Justice System. *Developmental Disabilities Research Reviews.* 2009; 15:250-7.

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**Alcohol Education & Rehabilitation Foundation (AER Foundation):** The AER Foundation is an independent, charitable organisation working to prevent the harmful use of alcohol in Australia. Since 2001, the AER Foundation has invested over \$115 million in research and community projects to minimise the impact of alcohol misuse on Australians. Through our national grants program and commissioned research, the AER Foundation has established itself as a leading voice on alcohol and other drugs issues. We work with community groups, all levels of government, police, emergency workers, research institutions and the private sector to address alcohol-related problems. For further information visit our website: [www.aerf.com.au](http://www.aerf.com.au)