

Media Release

PREGNANT WOMEN NOT HEARING OR HEEDING SAFE DRINKING GUIDELINES

February 13, 2012: A leading researcher has urged the Commonwealth Government to do more to promote safe drinking guidelines following new research that shows one in five Australian women continue drinking once they know they are pregnant.

The study, by the Centre for Alcohol Policy Research (CAPR) and commissioned by FARE, highlights not only the continued confusion and a lack of knowledge about the harms of drinking while pregnant, but also the urgent need for major changes to people's attitude toward alcohol.

The study found that almost half of all pregnant women drank before knowing they were pregnant and 19.5 per cent continued to drink once they became aware of their pregnancy. It used the 2011 National Drug Strategy Household Survey (NDSHS) to examine rates of drinking during pregnancy.

FARE Chief Executive Michael Thorn said that the study clearly showed the level of confusion and misunderstanding in the community.

"There is no known safe level of alcohol consumption during pregnancy but these findings clearly demonstrate that the Commonwealth Government is failing to ensure that the messages about avoiding alcohol consumption during pregnancy are heard," Mr Thorn said.

Pointing to the finding that 47.3 per cent of women drank while pregnant but before knowledge of their pregnancy, the study's author, CAPR Director Professor Robin Room, said the research highlighted the potential harms that can occur without realisation.

"Of particular concern is that almost half of all women drank for up to six weeks after conception, but before knowing of their pregnancy, so some of these women may well have drunk enough to cause harm to the fetus," Professor Room said.

The research also indicates that drinking during pregnancy isn't only an issue for young women and the economically disadvantaged. In fact, it is pregnant women who are older and better off who are most likely to continue drinking even after their pregnancy is confirmed. The study found that approximately half of the women aged 36 or over continued to drink when they become aware of their pregnancy- substantially higher than the general population of pregnant women.

Mr Thorn said this latest research confirmed that women were unclear on the messages about drinking during pregnancy, and called on Government to do more to promote the National Health and Medical Research Council's (NHMRC) *Australian Guidelines to Reduce Health Risks from Drinking Alcohol*.

"This research tells us there is confusion and a lack of knowledge of the dangers of drinking while pregnant that extends across age and socio-economic status. It is almost three years since the NHMRC Alcohol Guidelines were last changed, yet here we are, still waiting for the Commonwealth Government to roll out a comprehensive national campaign," Mr Thorn said.

Stressing the need for wide-ranging and targeted promotion of the guidelines, Mr Thorn said that a major attitude change was needed right across the Australian community.

"Everyone needs to support expectant mothers to refrain from drinking, families need to be aware of the considerable risks of drinking while pregnant, and fathers have an important role to play in supporting their partners to resist drinking alcohol," Mr Thorn said.

Key Findings

- 47.3 per cent of women drank while pregnant, before knowledge of their pregnancy;
- 19.5 per cent of women drank while pregnant, after knowledge of their pregnancy;
- rates of drinking after knowledge of pregnancy increases with age and a range of socioeconomic variables; and
- age is thought to be the driving force in this trend. Over 90 per cent of those aged 25 or under who were drinking before their knowledge of pregnancy stopped drinking when they became aware of their pregnancy, while only approximately half of those aged 36 or over did.

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Michael Thorn and Robin Room are available for interview.

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