MEDIA RELEASE

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PRESSURE'S ON TO TACKLE INVISIBLE EPIDEMIC AFFECTING GENERATIONS OF AUSTRALIANS

1 August 2019: A group of leading medical and public health bodies is backing calls for a parliamentary inquiry into Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), after it was revealed Australia has one of the highest rates of alcohol use during pregnancy in the world.

The NHMRC Centre for Research Excellence (CRE) in FASD, NOFASD Australia, the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE), and the National Rural Health Alliance (NRHA) support an urgent inquiry into FASD, which is a permanent yet preventable disability.

Executive Officer of NOFASD Australia Louise Gray says FASD is estimated to affect up to five per cent of the Australian population, with a potential range between two to nine per cent of babies born with FASD each year.

“The majority of these children and adults live with significant cognitive, behavioural, health and learning difficulties, including problems with memory, attention, cause-and-effect reasoning, impulsivity, receptive language and adaptive functioning difficulties,” Ms Gray said.

The call for an inquiry was made in Federal Parliament this week by Senator Stirling Griff of the Centre Alliance Party during a Matter of Public Importance debate in the Senate.

Senator Griff said more urgency was required and called for a wide-ranging parliamentary inquiry and greater investment in raising public awareness about drinking during pregnancy.

FARE Chief Executive Michael Thorn says extraordinary work has been done during the past decade to respond to this complex, preventable disability, but paltry levels of funding are impeding efforts to prevent new FASD cases.

“Since a House of Representatives inquiry into FASD in 2012, further evidence about the prevalence of FASD shows the mounting scale of this problem in Australia,” Mr Thorn said.

“For example, in a recent study conducted by the CRE, more than one third of juveniles in detention in Western Australia (36 per cent) were diagnosed with FASD,” he said.

Louise Gray says children and adults with FASD are also at risk of issues like school suspension, expulsion or truancy; may experience problems getting jobs and finding housing, and are at heightened risk of using alcohol and other drugs.

“Providing support services for these lifelong difficulties is spread across the health, education, child protection and criminal justice systems, and is estimated to cost $1.8 billion every year,” Ms Gray said.

The group says a parliamentary inquiry should address the prevalence of FASD, gaps in diagnostic services and support for people and their carers, especially the persistent problems people with FASD are having accessing the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

The groups also support calls for a National Awareness Campaign.

“Raising awareness of FASD is important, with the National Drug Strategy Household Survey 2016 finding one in four pregnant women in Australia continue to drink alcohol after knowledge of their pregnancy,” Ms Gray said.

“This results in approximately 75,000 alcohol-exposed pregnancies annually. Women have a right to know and want to know if something may harm their baby before birth,” she said.

Studies by leading researchers in Australia, including paediatrician and CRE Director Professor Elizabeth Elliott, found that 60 per cent of women drink at any time in pregnancy and 40 per cent are unaware that alcohol could harm the fetus.

“Australia has among the highest rates of prenatal alcohol exposure in the world, even though national guidelines advise women not to consume alcohol when planning a pregnancy and during pregnancy and breastfeeding,” Professor Elliott said

“Our FASD clinic has a large number of children awaiting assessment, yet few clinicians have the skills and confidence to identify and diagnose FASD and more training and capacity is required,” she said.

The Australian Medical Association (AMA) has previously emphasised the need for increased awareness of FASD – both among clinicians and the general community – and how this relates to appropriate treatment and support.

The AMA’s 2016 FASD Position Statement reports that, despite the advantages of timely diagnosis and early intervention, “many people with FASD are not identified until relatively late in life, or not at all”.

A National FASD Strategic Action Plan 2018-2028 was launched in November 2018 with attached funding of just $7 million and only $1.47 million allocated to prevention initiatives.

“There has never been an awareness campaign to prevent FASD at the national level, but this would be the most effective vehicle for preventing this epidemic from continuing,” Mr Thorn said.

Mr Thorn and Professor Elliott are available for interview.

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