

Senate inquiry into effective approaches to prevention and diagnosis of FASD and strategies for optimising life outcomes for people with FASD

24 June 2020

Opening Statement

FARE CEO Caterina Giorgi

Thank you Senators for the opportunity to appear before this [Inquiry](#).

As the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated, the health and wellbeing of our families and communities is the most important thing to Australians. This time has shown us that as a community, we care about each other and we look out for each other. This is who we are.

When it comes to Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), the health and wellbeing of our families and communities should be at the forefront of the development of policies and programs to prevent the disorder and to support people who are impacted.

Just over eight years ago FARE appeared at an Inquiry into FASD held by the House of Representatives. That Inquiry provided a range of recommendations and since this time important steps have been taken by the Australian Government:

- We have had two national FASD strategic actions plans
- We now have a FASD diagnostic tool and some diagnostic clinics, and
- Programs developed by FARE such as [Women Want to Know](#) and [Pregnant Pause](#) have been supported to provide the foundation for future prevention campaigns.

These are important steps.

But, moving forward, more change is needed if we are going to do all we can to prevent babies being born with FASD.

Good policy comes from asking the right questions. But the questions that we are most often asked in relation to FASD is ‘How do women not know that you shouldn’t drink during pregnancy?’ and ‘Why do women continue to drink during pregnancy?’.

These questions are problematic because they focus on women alone and fail to ask about the role of others.

Given that FASD is caused exclusively by the consumption of alcoholic products, one of the biggest questions we should be asking is what are the people who produce and sell alcohol doing to prevent their products from causing this harm?

And why have their products never carried a mandatory, visible and clear warning label to alert the community to the risks of FASD?

The first application for a pregnancy health warning came in 1996 by the Australian National Council on Women. Then, 15 years later, a comprehensive Government review, *Labelling*

Logic and House of Representatives Inquiry, recommended a mandatory label on pregnancy be placed on all alcoholic products.

Between then and now lobby groups funded by large alcohol corporations have run campaigns to stop pregnancy health warnings.

Now that a decision has been made that warnings will be mandatory, these lobby groups are pushing for a label with words that have less cut through and fewer colours to make it invisible.

A national poll held in January of more than 2,000 people showed that almost one in four Australians (23%) are unaware that NO alcohol is the only safe level during pregnancy. When looking at Australians aged 25 to 34 years – people most likely to be thinking about having a baby – more than one in three people (35%) are unaware.

And why would they be?

At this point in time:

- There are no mandatory health labels on alcoholic products warning about the risks of alcohol use in pregnancy
- There is no national awareness raising campaign
- Health professionals are not consistently providing clear advice to women to avoid all alcohol in pregnancy, and
- There is no consistent collection of data on alcohol use in pregnancy.

But, this can all change.

The next six to 12 months present opportunities to lay the foundation for future reforms that will make a difference to the health of families and communities.

FARE has been given a multi-year grant by the Australian Government to undertake a nationwide campaign on alcohol and pregnancy.

This will be the first large scale campaign of its kind in this country and the Australian Government should be commended for this commitment.

The National Health and Medical Research Council has drafted new alcohol and pregnancy [guidelines](#), due for release at the end of the year, with the clearest advice yet stating that alcohol should not be consumed during pregnancy.

And, Ministers on the Forum on Food Regulation will meet in less than one month to discuss pregnancy health warnings for alcoholic products. At this meeting they'll have the opportunity to approve an evidence-based label designed over a two-year consultation process.

Seventy per cent (70%) of Australians support the draft warning recommended by FSANZ. The warning is also supported by more than 100 not-for-profit organisations, research institutes and health professional groups.

It is now time for this label to be made a reality.

The decisions that are made now have the potential to impact on the lives of future generations for the better. And with a condition that is preventable and also lifelong, we have a responsibility to put the health and wellbeing of families first – just as we are all doing now as a community.

ENDS