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ALCOHOL'S IMPACT ON NT CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM

19 November 2013: Almost nine in 10 children (86%) on Protection Orders in the Northern Territory (NT) were exposed to harmful alcohol use by one or both parents.

A new study released on day one of the Australasian Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD) Conference has found strong evidence that exposure to parental alcohol use is associated with increased risk of children entering care.

Prenatal Alcohol Exposure among Children in the Child Protection System in the Northern Territory, examined the files of 230 children involved with the child protection system in the Northern Territory in 2011-12.

It also found that prenatal alcohol exposure (drinking while pregnant) was associated with entering care, with one in five (21%) children in the study having experienced prenatal alcohol exposure.

For children on Protection Orders, that figure rose to two in five children (40%) having experienced prenatal alcohol exposure.

Infants in families with harmful parental alcohol use are extremely vulnerable. Seven families in the sample of 230 had experienced an infant death, and harmful maternal alcohol use was identified in six of these cases.

All of the six children were also prenatally exposed to alcohol.

Researcher Prue Walker, says children who have been prenatally exposed to alcohol are particularly vulnerable to developmental delays and when combined with concerning parental alcohol use, can suffer neglect and poor health outcomes.

"Child protection systems need to recognise the impact of FASD on children, who are already vulnerable due to their exposure to parental alcohol use. This is not just a health issue but a social issue that affects the long term welfare of children," Ms Walker said.

Ms Walker says child protection workers also need tools to assist them to better assess parents' drug and alcohol issues, in order to identify children at risk of long term harm, and plan more effective interventions.

"Identification and planning for high risk infants in families where parents engage in concerning drug or alcohol use also needs to be a focus in the child protection system to prevent child deaths," Ms Walker said.

Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE) Chief Executive, Michael Thorn says the NT study illustrates the ripple effects of alcohol misuse and its devastating impact on families and communities.

"These alarming figures further demonstrate the need for meaningful action to reduce alcohol related harms. The study also reminds us that the issue of FASD is not simply a public health issue, but one that impacts significantly on the criminal justice, child protection and education sectors as well," Mr Thorn said.

The *Australasian Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders Conference: Time to learn, time to act*, is being held by the Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA) and FARE in association with the National Organisation for Fetal Alcohol Syndrome and Related Disorders (NOFASD) Australia, the Russell Family Fetal Alcohol Disorders Association (RFFADA), Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, University of Sydney, Alcohol HealthWatch New Zealand and the University of Queensland.

Professor Mike Daube, Convenor of PHAA's Alcohol Special Interest Group says the conference will refocus attention on the leading preventable cause of non-genetic intellectual disability in Australia.

"People born with FASD have the disability for life and the implications are far reaching. Through this Conference, we hope to raise greater awareness of FASD and the importance of prevention, and highlight the need for better outcomes for those with FASD, their families, carers and communities. We know much of what needs to be done: research such as this emphasises how important that action is," Professor Daube said.

Key Findings

The study found strong evidence that exposure to parental alcohol use is associated with increased risk of children entering care.

- 86% of children on Protection Orders were exposed to harmful alcohol use by one or both parents
- 57% of children under investigation were exposed to harmful alcohol use by one or both parents
- 64% of children on Protection Orders were exposed to long term maternal alcohol use

The study also found that prenatal alcohol exposure was associated with entering care.

- 21% of children in the study experienced prenatal alcohol exposure
- 40% of children on Protection Orders experienced prenatal alcohol exposure
- In some locations up to 88% of children in care experienced prenatal alcohol exposure

There were indicators that children exposed to prenatal alcohol use experienced more significant behavioural and health issues than other children.

- Of the prenatally alcohol exposed children, 23% had behavioural problems compared to 13% of non-exposed children.
- 6% of exposed children had a FAS diagnosis and 8% were suspected of having FASD.
- 10% of exposed children had a speech delay and 15% had a developmental delay.

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Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE) is an independent, charitable organisation working to prevent the harmful use of alcohol in Australia. Since 2001, FARE has invested over \$115 million in research and community projects to minimise the impact of alcohol misuse on Australians. Through its national grants program and commissioned research, FARE has established itself as a leading voice on alcohol and other drugs issues. FARE works 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 FARE's website: www.fare.org.au



Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA) is recognised as the principal non-government organisation for public health in Australia and works to promote the health and well-being of all Australians. The Association seeks better population health outcomes based on prevention, the social determinants of health and equity principles. For further information visit PHAA's website: www.phaa.net.au/