# Nation's Experts Endorse FASD Action Plan

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| **Author** | Fare\_Admin |
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The country’s leading Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) experts have endorsed a proposed national plan to reduce the incidence of the most common preventable cause of developmental disability in Australia.

A fully costed $37 million solution to address the gaps in the prevention and management of FASD, the Australian Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder Action Plan 2013-16 was launched at Parliament House in Canberra today by the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE).

The plan was unveiled ahead of a day of expert briefings, with twelve of Australia’s leading experts including Professor Elizabeth Elliott, Ms Sue Miers, Associate Professor Jane Latimer and Ms June Oscar providing over 50 one-on-one briefings throughout the day to Federal politicians.

FASD is a non-diagnostic term representing a range of conditions that may result from prenatal alcohol exposure. A lifetime condition, the underlying brain damage caused by prenatal alcohol exposure can result in poor memory, impaired language and communication, poor impulse control and mental, social, behavioural and emotional problems.

As there is limited diagnostic capacity among health professionals in Australia, and no standardised diagnostic instrument currently available, the prevalence of FASD in Australia is believed to be significantly underestimated, with conservative estimates for the prevalence of FAS, one of a range of conditions within the spectrum, indicating that 200 children are born with the condition each year. Work done to date however, strongly suggests the prevalence of FASD is in fact much higher. Recent research which examined rates of drinking during pregnancy showed that almost half of all pregnant women drank alcohol before knowing they were pregnant, and 19.5 per cent continued to drink alcohol once they became aware of their pregnancy.

FARE’s plan addresses five priority areas: increasing awareness of FASD, increasing diagnostic capability, improved services and support for people with FASD, improved data collection and efforts to close the gap among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. The Plan was developed in consultation with 33 leading FASD experts, and has been endorsed by the Australian FASD Collaboration and peak FASD consumer and carer organisation, National Organisation for Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (NOFASARD). Its release comes ahead of the findings of the House of Representatives Committee Inquiry into FASD expected to be handed down later this month.

The comprehensive plan recommends a broad population-based prevention approach to addressing FASD, with $10.2 million to fund a public education campaign and a further $7.3 million to establish three FASD specific diagnostic clinics across Australia and two research projects in remote and isolated Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander communities.

Professor Elizabeth Elliott, Professor of Paediatrics & Child Health at Westmead Children’s Hospital says a National Plan will have enormous impact on preventing cases of FASD.

“To prevent more children being born with FASD, we need to reduce the harmful consumption of alcohol across the whole Australian community. This plan outlines ways we can decrease alcohol use in pregnancy as well as to increase community awareness of its harms, improve diagnosis and care for children with FASD,” Professor Elliott said.

NOFASARD’s Sue Miers praised the plan for balancing prevention measures with efforts to support people living with FASD and their families and carers by increasing their access to appropriate services and support.

“For too long I have felt like a lone voice on this issue. It is so heartening to see increasing interest from government, and the community mobilising to help people with FASD to better achieve their full potential. Recognising FASD as a disability is key. It means that people with FASD, and their parents and carers, will have access to funding, services and early intervention programs that will ultimately provide a better quality of life,” Ms Miers said.

Praising government’s recent efforts and funding toward the prevention of FASD and support for those effected, FARE Chief Executive Michael Thorn has urged the Government to seize the growing momentum and says now is the time to bring Australia’s invisible disability into the light.

“Government can move swiftly to adopt the plan’s recommendations by staying the course on its commitment to introduce mandatory pregnancy alcohol warning labels, adopting the FASD diagnostic instrument and by funding FASD services under the National Disability Insurance Scheme. Adopting the Australian Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder Action Plan will ensure our efforts to effectively address FASD in Australia do not falter,” Mr Thorn said.

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