



Media Release

GREATER JUSTICE FOR PEOPLE WITH FASD

3 April 2013: A study of the Western Australian justice system has identified that up to 85 per cent of staff say responding to the needs of people with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD) is an issue in their work.

The report by the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research recommends greater awareness, better training and education and alternate sentencing options that consider the neurocognitive impairments associated with FASD.

Funded by the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE) the report, *Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder: Knowledge, Attitudes and Practice within the Western Australian Justice System* aimed to assess justice professional's awareness and knowledge of FASD; assess the perceived impact of FASD on practice within the justice system and identify the information needs relating to FASD for the justice system in Western Australia.

FASD results from fetal exposure to alcohol. It is an umbrella term used to describe a range of cognitive, physical, mental behavioural, learning and developmental disorders.

More than 75 per cent of judicial officers, 85 per cent of lawyers and DCS staff and almost 50 per cent of police officers who completed the survey perceived FASD as relevant to their work.

Knowledge about FASD was highest among Department of Corrective Services staff who were more likely (44 per cent) to report having a good understanding of how FASD affects children and adults than participants from the other sectors.

While 80 per cent of all participants agreed that FASD is a real condition, most participants reported only a basic understanding of FASD and how it affects individuals.

72 per cent of all participants indicated a need for more information about FASD, including how to improve the identification of individuals in need of specialist assessment, and guidelines on how to deal with people with FASD.

Lead Investigator, Dr Raewyn Mutch says there was widespread agreement (judicial officers 79 per cent and lawyers 92 per cent) that the assessment and diagnosis of FASD would improve the possibilities for young people with FASD and would prevent their continued engagement with the justice system over time.

“There is general acknowledgement that a disproportionate number of youths and adults with a FASD are engaged in the Australian justice system. This report supports the Western Australian justice system to more effectively consider and manage those individuals with a FASD, with the hope of preventing their repeat and continued engagement with the law,” Dr Mutch said.

Dr Mutch praised the members of the WA justice system, judges, magistrates, registrars, lawyers, Corrective Services staff and police officers who took part in the survey and contributed to the report. Dr Mutch affirmed the support of every sector in allowing this research and their willingness to engage in subsequent work, translating the findings to improve their practice.

“It’s very important to stress that the gaps identified in this research are not peculiar to Western Australia. They have been identified in Queensland and exist across State boundaries and over a range of health and social services. The purpose of this research is not to condemn, but rather to identify opportunities to ensure that the justice system can better accommodate people with a FASD,” Dr Mutch said.

The report emphasised the need for change both within and outside the justice system, a call echoed by FARE’s Chief Executive, Michael Thorn.

“This is not just an issue for Western Australia or the legal community. We need a comprehensive national action plan that ensures that social, medical and legal professionals working on the frontlines have appropriate training and support; a recommendation supported by the House of Representatives Parliamentary Inquiry into FASD which was handed down last November,” Mr Thorn said.

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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

The Telethon Institute for Child Health Research is one of the largest, and most successful medical research institutes in Australia, comprising a dedicated and diverse team of more than 500 staff and students. Established in 1990 in Subiaco, Western Australia, the independent and not-for-profit institute was among the first to adopt a multidisciplinary approach to major health issues. The Telethon Institute has strong affiliations with Princess Margaret Hospital for Children and all the major Western Australian universities. www.childhealthresearch.org.au/