



Foundation for Alcohol  
Research & Education

## Media Release

**Embargoed for release until 12:01am, 29 May, 2014**

# NT MUST RESPOND TO DEVASTATING DISORDER

**29 May 2014:** Experts say a lack of action to prevent the leading preventable cause of non-genetic disability in Australia threatens to destroy the lives of future generations in the Northern Territory.

The risk and prevalence of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) in the Northern Territory is expected to be among the highest in the nation and the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE) says the Northern Territory Government needs to act immediately to prevent, diagnose and manage the problem.

FARE will today advise the Northern Territory Government's *Select Committee on Action to Prevent Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder* that as the primary provider in health, education and the criminal justice system, they have a significant role to play in the prevention, diagnosis and management of FASD.

FARE Chief Executive Michael Thorn says while FASD is a serious public health issue for the whole nation, it is of particular concern for the Northern Territory.

"The exact prevalence of FASD is not known, but the high levels of alcohol consumption among women in the Northern Territory mean that it is likely to be particularly high. That's a tragedy for the children, families and carers devastated and impacted by what is a preventable disorder, and it's a tragedy that the Northern Territory Government can no longer afford to ignore," Mr Thorn said.

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.

In its submission to the Legislative Assembly Select Committee, FARE was also critical of moves by the Northern Territory Government to criminalise women who are alcohol dependent and pregnant.

Mr Thorn says the Northern Territory Government should instead be providing those women with specialist support services.

"Locking up pregnant women is an abhorrent policy response that does nothing but stigmatise women and prevent them from seeking the services they require, and flies in the face of all the available evidence of what works and what doesn't," Mr Thorn said.

In the absence of any real action on FASD at the Commonwealth and State levels, Mr Thorn says the present Inquiry presents the Northern Territory with an opportunity to play a leadership role on a dire and pressing national health issue.

“There has been plenty of talk at the national and state levels, but no action. We know what to do to prevent FASD and we know how to support people with FASD and their parents and carers. The unfortunate reality is that despite this, nothing has changed. There’s no prevention campaigns, and no support for people with FASD and their families. The Select Committee has an opportunity to recommend the Northern Territory Government take action that would prevent FASD and lead to a better future for all those affected,” Mr Thorn said.

Mr Thorn also renewed his call on the Commonwealth to restate its commitment to the \$20 million Action Plan for FASD, announced by the former Australian Government prior to the last election.

“Last year it seemed that at long last, FASD, this issue of national importance, would finally get the recognition and resourcing that it demands and deserves. Now, six months on, the status of the Action Plan under the new Government remains uncertain. FASD is not an a burden for one State or Territory alone to shoulder but rather a responsibility that must be shared and addressed by the nation together, and I again call on the Commonwealth to clearly outline its commitment to the plan,” Mr Thorn said.

**Michael Thorn (@MichaelTThorn) is available for interview.**

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The **Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE)** is an independent, not-for-profit organisation working to stop the harm caused by alcohol. Alcohol harm in Australia is significant. More than 3,500 lives are lost every year and more than 100,000 people are hospitalised making alcohol one of our nation’s greatest preventative health challenges.

For over a decade, FARE has been working with communities, governments, health professionals and police across the country to stop alcohol harms by **supporting world-leading research, raising public awareness and advocating for changes to alcohol policy**. In that time FARE has helped more than 750 communities and organisations, and backed over 1,400 projects around Australia. For further information visit FARE’s website: [www.fare.org.au](http://www.fare.org.au).