Governments must act on alcohol-affected babies

Parents and carers rearing children with lifelong brain damage from alcohol exposure before birth have pleaded with government to intervene.

Queensland’s Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD) Support Group Founding Member and President Sam Pinell said the problem was Australia’s greatest challenge, with as many as 30 or more babies a day born with what is recognised as a primary disability.

“An action plan designed around prevention, awareness and education strategies along with urgent assessment, diagnosis and support for those already hurt by prenatal alcohol exposure is desperately needed,” she said.

“Moreover the political parties must decline donations from the alcohol industry and address their advertising and promotion of sport.

“We are struggling with an immense problem, the Queensland FASD Support Group has recently expanded to accommodate other parents and carers from interstate, and now has 215 members.

“Urgent action is critical.”

Russell Family Fetal Alcohol Disorders Association (RFFADA) CEO Anne Russell said it was also critical to identify FASD babies within the first few years of life before secondary disabilities developed.

“Babies with FASD begin life struggling with the primary disability which is characterised by abnormal facial features, small head, low birth weight, poor coordination, hyperactive behavior, intention, poor memory, speech and language delays, with or without low IQ, lack reasoning and judgement skills, vision and/or hearing problems as well as physical abnormalities with the heart, kidneys, bones and teeth,” she said.

“If primary disabilities are not identified in the first few years of life and dealt with according to a specific model of care, secondary disabilities will develop although some will not be obvious until puberty.

“Secondary disabilities are learning disabilities, disrupted school attendance, being victimised by bullies as well as being perpetrators of bullying, and vulnerable to mental health problems early in their life.

“They are also at high risk of inappropriate sexual behavior, lighting fires, stealing, involvement with the juvenile justice system, young parenting, addictions, domestic violence, health problems, homelessness and self-harm including suicide.

“Few will live independently and even fewer will meet society’s expectations of them.”
Collaboration for Alcohol Related Developmental Disorders (CARDD) coordinator Dr Janet Hammill said there had been no meaningful action from State or Federal Health Ministers, despite several reports, including from Four Corners (‘FASD: The Hidden Harm’ November 2015), about the dangers.

“It appears neither the Prime Minister nor the Premiers are aware of the immensity of FASD despite the crisis being seen in media reports” she said.

“This position must become the number one priority for an extraordinary meeting of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG).

“Our support groups are pleading with governments to intervene, it is the right of babies to be born into a society that values and nurtures them. Heads of Government must take immediate action to stop this hideous, yet preventable, brain damage.”

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