

March 2012

The Secretary

Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs
House of Representatives
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600.
Spfa.reps@aph.gov.au

Dear Sir/Madam,

RE: Submission on Inquiry into Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder

The Country Women's Association of the Northern Territory Incorporated is a group of like-minded women who work towards: improving the conditions of life for women and families living in the Northern Territory; giving community service and participating in and supporting town and district schemes for cultural and welfare projects.

Some teachers and care givers throughout the Northern Territory, who find themselves working with and or caring for children with FASD have expressed their frustration and concern. They have a duty of care for these children who present with poor attention spans, limited recall and a number of other learning difficulties. Unfortunately, they lack the specific skills, appropriate resources and adequate local community and professional support to best meet the identified needs of these children.

While some of the ill effects of the consumption of alcohol throughout the Northern Territory are well documented, it is difficult to obtain reliable data on FASD. Chondur and Wang writing in the NT Department of Health Information Sheet , *Health Gains Planning Information Sheet October 2010* highlights the difficulty in obtaining reliable statistics as the data that is available comes from a range of sources and there are significant variations between sources in both methods and definitions. They also point out the need for some caution when making comparisons between sources or between years. Their research into the consumption of alcohol by women in the NT indicates that from 2003 to 2006, approximately one in eight Indigenous pregnant women and nearly one in twelve non-Indigenous pregnant women reported consuming alcohol at the time of their first antenatal visit. By 36 weeks, the proportion of women consuming alcohol had fallen in both populations, by approximately 40% among Indigenous women to between 8.0 and 8.7%, and by approximately 60% in non-Indigenous to between 3.6 and 4.7%. (1)

The present consumption of alcohol, particularly across the population in the NT, continues to be considerably higher than the national average. The NT Department of Health 2010-2011 Health Report states the Territory 2030 Plan target is "By 2020 reduce the amount of alcohol Territorians consume to the national average." (2) Simply by reducing the amount of alcohol

consumed to the national average will not necessarily help pregnant women and their unborn babies of today nor their unborn children of tomorrow.

FASD is completely preventable. This association believes that immediate action is called for to address the consumption of alcohol by all women of child bearing age and makes the following recommendations:

Prevention strategies recommended include:

- Building capacity in local communities by engaging Health Workers who share a common cultural background.
- Increasing the number of Health Workers in the promotion, education and delivery of best practice in Women's Health.
- Providing access for everyone, regardless of where they live, to basic health care.
- Delivering education programs that clearly demonstrate the cause and impact of FASD to all school students as a matter of urgency.
- Mandating the introduction of product warnings on all alcohol products as soon as possible.
- Reduce the alcohol content of all drinks.

Intervention needs include:

- Developing a national set of standard diagnostic tools for the earliest possible diagnosis of FASD.
- Conducting a national screening to gain reliable statistics on the incidents of FASD.
- Running public education programs through all forms of media.
- Developing promotional material using film, print and the web.
- Including causes and effects of FASD in all education programs for personnel training to work in health, education and police.
- Delivering professional development programs on the causes and effects of FASD for all personnel currently working in health, education and police.
- Funding research into FASD as a matter of urgency.
- Providing information and knowledge to parents and care givers on the causes and effects of FASD.

Management issues include:

- Provide adequate funding for educators, families and care givers to support the children suffering from FASD.

- Making available training and employment opportunities for children suffering from FASD.
- Developing local community services and facilities in collaboration with the members of the local community that will support both the children who are suffering from FASD and their families.
- Educating all members of the community in the causes and effects of FASD and the impact on families.
- Providing appropriate training for professionals working with people suffering from FASD.

References

1. NT Department of Health and Families, Alcohol use in the Northern Territory, *Health Gains Planning Information Sheet, Oct. 2010*, Ramakrishna Chondur and Zaimin Wang, Casuarina NT 0811
2. NT Department of Health, *Annual Report 2010-2011*, NT Government 2011

Contact person for this submission is Mrs Lynne Bigg. Her address is [REDACTED]

Yours sincerely

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Judy Anictomatis

President

Country Women's Association of the Northern Territory