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Geneticist wins award for foetal alcohol work

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Cadet News Agency

IT WAS during his time as a paediatrician in Cape Town that Dennis Viljoen noticed a trend among his tiny patients – a tenth of them showed signs of foetal alcohol syndrome (FAS).

“One in 10 children we saw at the genetic clinic at the Red Cross Children’s Hospital showed signs of foetal alcohol syndrome,” said Viljoen.

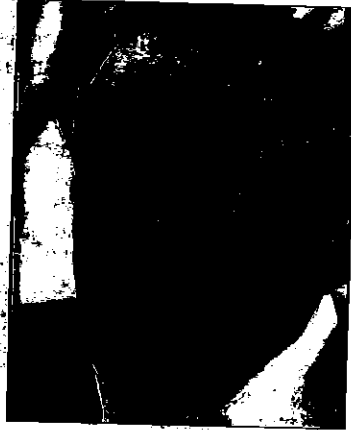
FAS is brought on by mothers drinking alcohol during pregnancy. The baby’s development is interrupted which results in possible brain and organ damage and poorly developed facial features.

Viljoen, a retired medical geneticist, is the 2012 winner of the prestigious Henry Rosett Award. The award “honours an individual for outstanding long-term contributions to research in the field of foetal alcohol spectrum disorders”. It is the first time the award has been won by a researcher outside North America.

For the last 15 years Viljoen has been chairman of the Foundation for Alcohol Related Research (FARR), a Cape Town-based NGO, where he has dedicated his time to researching FAS and its effects.

“We have published over 50 papers on research data from studies done around the country,” he said.

During the research, Viljoen and his colleagues tested children in the 3-7 age group, looking for signs of mental impairment and developmental issues.



HONOURED: Dennis Viljoen

In Wellington they found a FAS prevalence rate as high as 88/1 000 cases.

Viljoen said the biggest risk groups were the poorest people. He said that, for the most part, liquor was readily and easily available. He added that the effects of the “dop” system, where farmworkers were paid in liquor, were still being felt and shebeens posed a serious issue.

“If you go into the poorest dwellings, there are no recreational outlets. People drink to socialise,” he said.

Viljoen said education was one of the best ways to try to solve the problem.

He travels all over the country giving speeches and lecturers on FAS.

“We have to spread the message to people using a variety of platforms and lead them down the path to prevention.”

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