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Health & Sex

Silence to highlight dangers of drinking while pregnant



Share the message that no amount of alcohol is safe during pregnancy.

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Tomorrow, September 9, at 9.08am, people around the world will stand in silence for a single minute.

At 9.09 a bell will be rung to break the silence.

After that everyone involved – parents, community workers and friends – will share the message that no amount of alcohol is safe during pregnancy.

September 9 is World FASD Day. FASD, or Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, happens when an unborn child is exposed to alcohol. All pregnant mothers who use, but not necessarily abuse, alcohol during pregnancy are at risk of producing a baby with abnormal signs and symptoms.

South Africa has the highest rate of FASD in the world.

The disorder is an umbrella term that can include mild to severe brain damage, learning and behaviour problems and physical disabilities.

The consumption of alcohol during pregnancy can also cause organ damage in the foetus. Foetal Alcohol Syndrome is the most severe form of the disorder. It is estimated that over six million South Africans have been affected by FASD.

South Africa has an FASD rate 14 times higher than the rest of the world, said Leana Olivier, chief executive of the Foundation for Alcohol-Related Research (FARR).

“This is according to a meta-analysis by the American Medical Association journal JAMA Pediatrics,” she said. “It basically corroborates what we have been saying for years, but having it confirmed through an international study makes the message even more powerful.”

Worldwide almost 8 out of every 1,000 children have FASD. In South Africa the rate is 111 per 1,000 children, around 11 percent.

In the Northern Cape the rate of children suffering from FASD is as high as 28 percent.

Over the past 20 years FARR has investigated the prevalence of FASD in 12 communities ranging from Gauteng to the Northern, Eastern and Western Cape Provinces.

The foundation's research has gained worldwide recognition, with more than 50 scientific articles published on the subject.

Olivier said there is anecdotal evidence that the message is spreading.

"We have been working in De Aar in the Northern Cape since 2000 and we now see women coming to the centre saying that they are planning to get pregnant and want to be part of our Healthy Mother Healthy Baby programme.

"In a country where 78% of pregnancies are unplanned, this is an amazing development. We have second time mothers returning, and grannies who bring their young pregnant grandchildren along to the programme.

"We have also stepped up involving men in the programme." Olivier said the organisation is still battling mixed messages.

"Some doctors are still saying that one or two glasses of red wine wont do any harm. We believe that the message needs to be as rigid as: don't drink at all when you are pregnant."

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is an umbrella term for the following conditions:

Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) is the most severe form of the FASD. Children with FAS have specific facial features, growth retardation, small head circumference, brain damage, developmental delays, learning disabilities and interpersonal relationship problems.

Partial FAS (PFAS): Children might have some of the facial and physical signs of FAS, but are not as severely affected as children with full-blown FAS.

Alcohol Related Neurodevelopmental Disorders (ARND) refers to children born with brain damage and therefore intellectual and learning disabilities. These children might not have any distinctive facial features.

Alcohol Related Birth Defects (ARBD) refers to children born with organ damage (e.g. heart, eyes, ears, skeletal, etc.).

All diagnosis need to be made by specialists specifically trained to do the clinical and neurodevelopmental assessments, as well as the maternal interviews