



Family Digest 15
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Foetal Alcohol Syndrome

Recently, the SACBC Parliamentary Liaison Office hosted a discussion that focused on a common form of disability which is both 100% preventable and 100% irreversible – Foetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS). According to the University of Stellenbosch Nutrition Centre, FAS is a birth defect caused by heavy alcohol consumption (usually in a binge pattern) during pregnancy. It is characterised by growth retardation, facial and neural abnormalities, as well as malformations of some organ systems.

Distinctive facial features, learning disabilities, bone and joint deformities, heart defects, hyperactivity, and behavioural and learning problems are some symptoms of this disorder. While treatment can help, FAS cannot be cured or reversed.

FAS is a manifestation of deep and tragic socio-economic factors. It is a legacy of the ‘*dop*’ system which began with the growing of vineyards at the very beginning of the colonization of the Western Cape, and which has resulted in an intergenerational culture of alcohol abuse. The consumption of alcohol is seen as a primary recreational activity in the absence of other entertainments such as sporting facilities and music and dance opportunities. Excessive drinking is also a symptom of the hopelessness and helplessness that so many farmworkers and rural-dwellers experience.

The Foundation for Alcohol Related Research (FARR) recently concluded a three-year study in the Saldanha Bay Municipality, which includes five small seaside towns on the West Coast. They found that the prevalence rate of FAS in South Africa is several times higher than elsewhere in the world. It is estimated that between 70 and 80 per 1000 babies born in the Western Cape have the syndrome.

However, it is mistaken to see FAS as a disability confined to the poor. Irresponsible drinking during pregnancy occurs across the socio-economic spectrum and affects all races and ethnicities. Furthermore, while the prevalence of FAS is highest in the Western Cape it is not confined to that region; it occurs all over South Africa.

Lois Law
Researcher

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