

Lifeline

News from the

Alcohol and Drug Abuse Council of Delaware County

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FAS is Preventable and Treatable, Experts Tell Conference

Three experts on fetal alcohol syndrome came to Delhi on April 30 to share their knowledge with local health workers at a day-long conference sponsored by the Alcohol and Drug Abuse Council of Delaware County.

In opening the conference, David Ramsey, executive director of the Council, pointed out that fetal alcohol syndrome, the leading cause of birth defects and mental retardation among children, is a preventable condition. If a woman does not drink alcohol during her pregnancy, her child

will not be affected by fetal alcohol syndrome.

The fact that FAS is preventable was also emphasized by the keynote speaker, Kathleen Tavenner Mitchell, program director and national spokesperson for the National Organization on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, in Washington, D.C.

"This is the one issue that is preventable," Mitchell said. "If our young women are not getting the message, then we are just setting them up for problems."

In tracing the history of FAS, Mitchell noted the doctors who identified the condition in 1973 believed that naming it Fetal Alcohol Syndrome would help prevent it.

"In reality," Mitchell said, "it only perpetuated the stigma."

"Too many people believe that the solution to FAS is getting rid of one bad woman," she said. The goal of her organization, NOFAS, is to "stop making it such a big deal and to have the public consider it just like any other treatable disease."

Mitchell opened her presentation with a moving account of her own youthful addiction to alcohol and other drugs and the tragic consequences of her drinking during her pregnancies.

Mitchell and Dr. Anthony Malone, who led an afternoon workshop, both pointed out that, despite increased public awareness of FAS, "the problem is getting worse."

Mitchell cited a

"400 percent increase in frequent and binge drinking by pregnant women from 1991 to 1995." Dr. Malone stated that "there is a higher awareness of FAS but no change in behavior among high-risk drinkers."

The speakers reviewed the three diagnostic criteria for FAS: facial abnormalities, growth deficiency and central nervous system dysfunction. However, not all children impaired by prenatal alcohol consumption meet all three criteria.

The most common and most difficult form to diagnose, according to Mitchell, is Alcohol-Related Neurodevelopmental Disorder (ARND) in which the child has "normal growth and normal facial characteristics but all sorts of brain problems."

The newest term for FAS is Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, Mitchell explained, a name that better illustrates the many forms the condition takes.

Experts now link prenatal drinking to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome and "a lot of other disorders that are not usually connected with FAS," Mitchell added.

The experts all stressed that there is "no magic bullet" for FAS. "We can only treat the symptoms rather than the underlying condition," Dr. Malone said.

In an afternoon workshop, Dianne O'Conno, a post adoption advocate from Albany, illustrated her presentation with accounts of caring for six FAS adopted children in her own home.

The conference was organized by Niki Dibble, an educator at the Alcohol and Drug Abuse Council. ■



Niki Dibble, top, conference organizer, greets attendees. Below, speaker Kathleen Mitchell talks with ADAC director Ramsey and Gary Demeree, an addictions counselor.

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Mission Statement

**The Alcohol and
Drug Abuse Council
of Delaware County (ADAC)
is dedicated to
the prevention of alcohol and
substance abuse
by providing
education, information, and
referral services.**

Letter from the Director

For the past three decades, medical science has put a great deal of effort into researching – and publicizing – the well-established fact that alcohol can be good for you. Probably you’ve seen the news reports. “Rx for Health: Two Martinis a Day,” one headline read.

Most of the studies indicate that moderate drinking – one or two alcoholic drinks a day – can prevent heart attacks, strokes, and dementia. A study released last year suggests that people with Type 2 diabetes could reduce their risk of artery disease by having an alcoholic drink or two a day, while another indicates that drinking moderate amounts of alcohol could help people, particularly women, better control their blood-glucose level.

The studies do say that health benefits are only derived from moderate drinking, but this point is often ignored or buried deep when the press reports on them. The truth is that drinking alcohol is a double-edged sword; heavy drinking can actually cause the strokes and heart attacks that moderate drinking is supposed to prevent. There is also the possibility that people with alcohol problems will use these studies as an excuse to keep on drinking excessively.

While moderate drinking can be pleasurable and risk-free, it would be foolish for someone to start drinking or increase their drinking simply for the health benefits. Certainly no responsible physician would recommend that to a patient.

In contrast, the message contained in the research on fetal alcohol syndrome (a subject covered elsewhere in this newsletter) leaves no room for waffling. Simply put, it says: “If you are pregnant, do not drink alcohol.” We can only wish that the connection between alcohol and other diseases was so clear and unequivocal.



Word from the Past

*Behold, thou shalt conceive and bear a son, and
thou shalt drink no wine.”*

Judges 13:7

(Passage cited by FAS expert to show that concern about drinking alcohol during pregnancy extends back to biblical times.)

COMMENTARY

Get Rid of ‘Substance Abuse’

by Tom McHale

For a number of years I’ve been asking myself why there is a growing trend to re-stigmatize, demedicalize, re-moralize, and criminalize the disease of addiction. After decades of steady progress -- what happened?

When I scan the list of reasons for the evaporation of this field, one reason stands above all else. The reason lies in what we have been telling the American people for nearly half a century: that alcoholics and other drug-addicted people are “substance abusers.”

The phrase “substance abuse” is pre-emptive. It spawns a host of false perceptions and myths about alcohol and drug users. It assigns guilt prior to investigation. It foils attempts to draft meaningful policies that will better serve communities. It absolves the alcohol industry and pharmaceutical companies of any wrongdoing, and instead provides them with full access and ability to saturate social markets with dangerous and potentially addictive products.

It makes it possible for society to practice incarceration at rates that translate into the sequestering of people not seen since the days of leper colonies.

Think how social attitudes would begin to change toward the diabetic community if they were thought of as abusers. Think of a press reporting on the negativity surrounding diabetes -- individuals who “willfully” ingest too much sugar and “refuse” to exercise and manage their medication. How long would it take to change public attitudes?

I am amazed by the arrogance of people in the addictions field who want to cling to the words “substance abuse” even though these words bring shame, guilt, and perpetuate stigmas about the very people they purportedly want to help.

It is time to let go of these ill-chosen words before they drain what little life is left in this field.

Tom McHale is a community advocate for people with addictions and in recovery.

**The opinions in this ‘Commentary’ are the author’s.
They do not necessarily reflect the views of ADAC.**

What is Fetal Alcohol Syndrome? Questions and Answers

What is Fetal Alcohol Syndrome?

FAS is a lifelong yet completely preventable set of physical, mental and neurobehavioral birth defects associated with alcohol consumption during pregnancy.

What are Alcohol-Related Neurodevelopmental Disorder (ARND) and Alcohol-Related Birth Defects (ARBD)?

Prenatal alcohol exposure does not always result in FAS—although there is no known safe level of alcohol consumption during pregnancy. Most individuals affected by alcohol exposure before birth do not have the characteristic facial abnormalities and growth retardation identified with FAS, yet they may have brain and other impairments that are just as significant.

Alcohol-Related Neurodevelopmental Disorder (ARND) describes the functional or mental impairments linked to prenatal alcohol exposure, and Alcohol-Related Birth Defects (ARBD) describes malformations in the skeletal and major organ systems.

What are the Primary Characteristics of FAS, ARND and ARBD?

Individuals with FAS have a distinct pattern of facial abnormalities, growth deficiency and evidence of central nervous system dysfunction. In addition to mental retardation, individuals with FAS, ARND and ARBD may have other neurological deficits such as poor motor skills and hand-eye coordination. They may also have a complex pattern of behavioral and learning problems, including difficulties with memory, attention and judgment.

How often do FAS, ARND and ARBD Occur?

As many as 12,000 infants are born each year with FAS and three times as many have ARND or ARBD. FAS, ARND and ARBD affect more newborns every year

than Down syndrome, cystic fibrosis, spina bifida and Sudden Infant Death Syndrome combined.

How can Alcohol-Related Effects be prevented?

FAS, ARND and ARBD are 100% preventable when a woman completely abstains from alcohol during her pregnancy. NOFAS prevents alcohol-related effects through public awareness and education, and by increasing access to prenatal health care.

Another key to prevention is to

“Fetal Alcohol Syndrome is the leading known cause of mental retardation and birth defects...”

screen all women of reproductive age for alcohol problems and to use appropriate strategies, such as treatment for alcohol problems, to eliminate drinking before conception.

How does a mother's drinking affect her unborn child?

When a pregnant woman drinks alcohol, so does her baby; through the blood vessels in the placenta, the mother's blood supplies the developing baby with nourishment and oxygen. If the mother drinks alcohol, the alcohol enters her blood stream and then, through the placenta, enters the blood supply of the growing baby.

Alcohol is a teratogen, which is a substance known to be toxic to human development. Depending on the actual amount, timing and pattern of use, if alcohol reaches the growing baby's blood sup-

ply, it can interfere with healthy development.

If a woman drinks wine, beer or liquor when she is pregnant, her baby could be born with FAS. There is no known safe amount of alcohol during pregnancy.

What if I am pregnant and have been drinking?

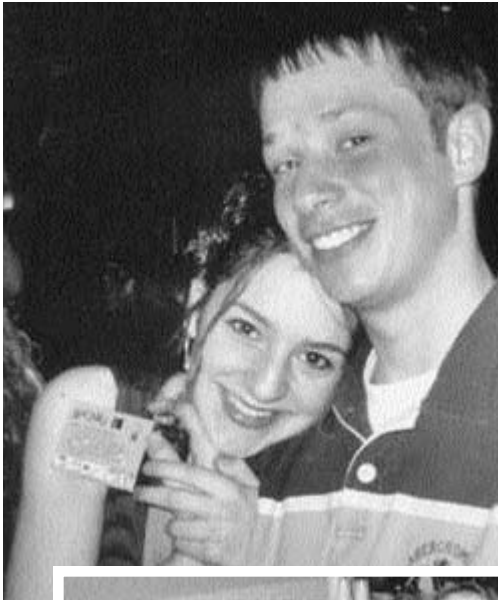
If you consumed alcohol before you knew you were pregnant, stop drinking now. Abstaining from alcohol for the remainder of your pregnancy can have a beneficial effect even on functions that might have been affected by earlier drinking. The sooner you stop drinking, the better the chance of having a healthy baby. You could be pregnant and not know it. So if you are trying to get pregnant or are sexually active and not using contraception, don't drink alcohol.

Information provided by N.O.F.A.S., the National Organization on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. N.O.F.A.S is committed to raising public awareness of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome and to developing and implementing innovative ideas in prevention, intervention, education and advocacy in communities throughout the nation. N.O.F.A.S. is located at 216 G Street, NE, Washington DC 20002. 202-785-4585. www.nofas.org

She Quit and Won!!



Tootsie Ryan of Hamden, right, is congratulated by Christina Hodges, a smoking cessation facilitator, on winning the \$450 prize for stopping smoking. The “quit and win” contest was underwritten by United Health Services.



Outside the annual meeting of Philip Morris in Virginia, members of the Delaware County Reality Check group hold their anti-Big Tobacco signs in front of a huge blow up of a cigarette pack reading "Licensed to Kill." At another event in Albany -- "Mock Oscars" protesting the prevalence of smoking in films -- Hillary Zujovic and Zack Vogel pose happily for the camera. Bottom left, Reality Check Coordinator Christina Hodges, her daughter Katie and husband David are among the notables at the Mock Oscars.

LifeLine

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National Organization on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome

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