

## Ministry of Health Submission to FASD Inquiry

The NSW Ministry of Health is supportive of the proposed Inquiry into the incidence and prevention of Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) and the development of a national approach to the prevention, intervention and management of FASD in Australia.

There is currently a significant amount of service development and research being conducted into FASD across NSW and Australia. It is expected the outcomes of the Inquiry will inform a consistent and cohesive approach to service delivery and the development of a strategy and supporting policies.

### Prevention strategies

The *NHMRC Australian Guidelines to Reduce Health Risks from Drinking Alcohol* was recently updated. One of the most significant changes to these guidelines was in regard to pregnancy and alcohol use; 'for women who are pregnant or considering pregnancy and women who are breastfeeding, not drinking is the safest option.' This is in contrast to the message in previous guidelines that was perceived to condone a low level of alcohol consumption whilst pregnant, considering pregnancy or breastfeeding.

It is important that the Inquiry identifies a clear and consistent message for health providers and consumers and that consistent information be provided across service sectors (ie drug and alcohol sector, maternity sector etc).

The Inquiry should aim to identify appropriate resources and venues for providing education/information on FASD to women of all childbearing age across the community, not just women with problematic alcohol use or at risk of problematic alcohol use.

The Inquiry should include a review of the adequacy of training provided to health staff that provide services to pregnant women and their children and identify training strategies that will support staff in the early identification of FASD and/or of women who are at risk of FASD.

### Intervention needs

The Inquiry should review services availability and identify any gaps in access to treatment for pregnant women whose baby may be at risk of FASD and review the adequacy of the support available to FASD children and their families. Early intervention is crucial in improving outcomes for babies/children identified with FASD as well as ongoing support that allow these children to reach their full potential.

FASD is more prevalent in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander than non-Indigenous infants. The Inquiry should review the availability of FASD services for Aboriginal women, specifically around diagnosis and early detection, and identify barriers to access including the availability of services that are culturally appropriate.

## **Management issues**

The management of FASD requires a cross Government approach as pregnant women and women of childbearing age usually access a range of service types. The Inquiry should ascertain and review all existing policies and guidelines aiming for consistency in the information provided on FASD. Currently in NSW the guidelines produced by drug and alcohol and the maternity sectors provide conflicting information on FASD.

The Inquiry should also seek to identify gaps in services and essential linkages required between services that come into contact with pregnant women and their unborn/newborn children who may be at risk of FASD.

The Inquiry should review existing data related to alcohol use in pregnancy and support the development of consistent data systems to inform on the incidence of FASD and provide an evidence base for the delivery of services, education/information and training to improve outcomes for children who have FASD or women at risk of giving birth to children affected by FASD.