4 February 2020

Pregnancy and alcohol: the surprising reality

Sunshine Coast Hospital and Health Service (SCHHS) Developmental and Behavioural Specialist Paediatrician Dr Heidi Webster and some of the other staff of the SCHHS Child Development Service (CDS) have taken part in a podcast series “Pregnancy and Alcohol: The Surprising Reality”.

The podcast was produced by the Sunshine Coast Local Drug and Alcohol Team, local podcaster Kurt Lewis, in conjunction with NOFASD Australia – the National Organisation for Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, and the SCHHS (CDS) in Caloundra.

It shines a light on Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), a lifelong disability caused by alcohol exposure while in the womb.

FASD can cause physical and developmental impairments in brain functioning in areas such as speech and language, memory, attention, cause and effect reasoning and difficulties in school learning, decision making and adapting to everyday situations may occur.

Dr Webster said that the prevalence of FASD is quite difficult to determine, as no mainstream screening is done in Australia.

“In the US and Canada it is estimated at least four per cent of the population is affected. We’d expect the figure to be on par, if not higher, here in Australia. If that is the case, we have many undiagnosed people across the country.

“As FASD often goes undetected and the effects vary considerably along a spectrum of severity, it is often referred to as the ‘invisible disability’.

“People think it is only children of women who are severely dependant on alcohol who are impacted. Any exposure to alcohol while in the womb can cause damage to an unborn baby,” Dr Webster said.

“In Australia as many as 50 per cent of pregnancies are unplanned. If you do choose to drink alcohol then it is important to use contraception to prevent alcohol exposure.

“There is no safe amount, timing or type of alcohol consumption for women who are pregnant or planning to get pregnant,” she said.

Dr Webster established the CDS FASD clinic in 2015 after a patient’s mother asked if her child’s developmental diagnosis could be Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. Not being familiar with diagnosing FASD she undertook training at the Gold Coast FASD clinic. On her return she assisted other allied health team members to learn about it as well, so that a local FASD assessment clinic could be offered here on the Sunshine Coast.
The SCHHS FASD multidisciplinary clinic continues to grow in terms of diagnosis, assessment and then post-diagnosis support for families.

Dr Webster said: “Diagnosis is a holistic and complex process. We explore 10 key areas of brain development via methods involving the child directly, also with their parents/carers.”

“Early diagnosis of FASD means any health and educational professionals working with the child will be able to better assist with the challenges they face. We know early diagnosis and interventions are linked with better long-term outcomes.

“That is why tools such as the ‘Pregnancy and Alcohol: The Surprising Reality’ are so important. Education and raising awareness as well as prevention of future affected pregnancies, are critical. As a community we all have a role to play to create the necessary support systems around women, all the way from prior to conception to a baby’s birth,” she said.

The podcast Pregnancy and Alcohol: The Surprising Reality is available on Anchor, Spotify and Apple.

A referral from your General Practitioner will be required to schedule an appointment with the SCHHS FASD Clinic.

MEDIA OPPORTUNITY

Opportunity to interview Dr Heidi Webster.

Where: Meet at the front of Caloundra Health Service, West Terrace, Caloundra QLD 4551
When: 10am, 5 February 2020

ENDS

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