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International FASday set for tomorrow

Fetal Alcohol Syndrome: Incurable, but preventable

When a woman is pregnant, every drop of alcohol she drinks, so does her unborn child.

Every drop. That can cause untold damage which will have everlasting on the child, his parents and the rest of society.

So says Shiona Watson of Acton, a parent of a child with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS).

Watson, a member of a member of FasWorld, a loose alliance of parents and health care professionals, is trying to create awareness of this little known, but preventable, condition.

"I cannot adequately express the importance of this issue as about 50 per cent of prison inmates are judged to suffer from FAS, and the costs on the taxpayer are enormous, to say nothing of the toll taken on parents raising these children," says Watson.

The second annual International FASday will be held tomorrow (Saturday), Sept. 9 when churches in Georgetown and Acton are expected to ring their bells at 9:09 a.m., in conjunction with church bells around the world. The date—the ninth day of the ninth month—was selected to symbolize the nine months of pregnancy.

But pushing the disorder to the forefront isn't easy.

"There's a huge stigma attached to it," said Watson. "There's a tremendous amount of judgment, even among those who think its okay to drink during pregnancy."

Watson is the adoptive mother of FAS-afflicted Michael, 5. Watson adopted Michael when he was 18 months old after bearing two healthy children of her own.

Along with FAS, Michael is deaf and suffers from scoliosis. He's also hyperactive, fearless and unable to understand consequences.

"I watch him like a hawk all the time. I can't let him be away from me," she says.

Though endlessly affectionate, Michael



Shiona Watson of Acton poses with her adopted son Michael. Watson is trying to create awareness of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, a little known but preventable condition that is caused when pregnant women consume alcohol.

Photo by Ted Brown

Story by Cynthia Gamble, staff writer and Irene Gentle, special

finds it difficult to connect with others.

"He loves to be around people but he doesn't know how to interact with them," says Watson. "He wants all the toys to himself. He doesn't want to share and he's very aggressive."

Many FAS/FAE children also suffer from a supreme sensitivity to touch.

"You may touch them lightly and they turn around and punch you because to them it feels like pain," says Ms Watson.

Diagnosis is tricky, since there's no definitive test for FAS/FAE. Instead, children are thought to have the condition only when everything else has been ruled out.

Since there's no cure, prevention is crucial.

That means hammering the message home that introducing alcohol at any stage in a pregnancy carries the risk of inflicting irreversible brain damage on unborn children, says Watson.

"The alcohol molecule is very small," says Watson. "It goes right through the

placenta. It isn't filtered out, like a lot of people think it is."

The internal organs of a fetus are not equipped to deal with getting rid of poison, which is what alcohol essentially is to the system, and the alcohol which is excreted from an adult's body in a few hours, may take days to leave the body of the fetus—days in which it alters and interferes with the formation of the baby. Alcohol consumed during the first trimester of pregnancy may result in a baby with dysmorphic (unusual) facial features, heart and kidney defects, vision and hearing deficits, spinal deformities and severe brain damage.

Continuing to drink during the next two trimesters results in the disruption of connections within the brain, which leads to learning disabilities, speech problems and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder among others.

And drinking even a little during pregnancy can result in the equally incurable, permanent and damaging Fetal

Alcohol Effect (FAE).

A main difference between FAS and FAE is the appearance of the victims.

The former are likely to bear the physical mark of FAS, such as wide-set eyes, low-set ears, a small nose with a low bridge, elliptical folds around the eyes, and no indentation between the upper lip and nose.

Because the signs of FAS are clearer, those with it are more likely to be diagnosed and get help.

Estimates vary, but about one in 500 people are thought to have FAS. Even more are likely to be injured by FAE.

"Now we all know the effects of alcohol on those who have had too much. They have trouble with balance, they make poor choices, they lose their inhibitions, they can no longer make the simplest of calculations, and they engage in risky behaviour," says Watson. "A child born with FAS or ARND (Alcohol Related Neurodevelopmental Disorder) has to live this way for the rest of their lives, as though permanently drunk."

Those affected are more prone to suffer from learning disabilities, to drop out of school early and slide into juvenile delinquency. Drug addiction, mental illness, child and spousal abuse are common, as are unemployment and poverty.

Many sufferers will at some point be confined to a prison, rehab centre or mental institution. And behaviours such as lying, stealing, violent tantrums, a high likelihood of addiction and an inability to learn from experience are hallmarks of how alcohol can forever injure a developing brain.

FasWorld believes FAS will cost taxpayers about \$2 million per lifetime of an afflicted individual. That includes the price tag for special education, health care, counselling, welfare and court and prison costs.

Since the damage can take place as early as three weeks after conception, accidental pregnancies are dangerous, says Watson.

If you would like to learn more about FAS or are looking for support, contact Watson at shionaw@stn.net or 853-3265.



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