



## MEDIA REPORTING MUDDIES ALCOHOL AND PREGNANCY MESSAGING

**12 August 2015:** Reporting by Australian media outlets is contributing to confusion about the risks of drinking alcohol while pregnant, according to a new study.

University of Canberra researchers examined how the Australian media portray alcohol and pregnancy and how women in turn, respond and interpret that information.

The findings add further weight to calls for better promotion of Australia's drinking guidelines with the ACT Government today launching *Women Want to Know*, a campaign that encourages health professionals to talk about alcohol with women who are pregnant or planning pregnancy.

The qualitative research, *Conversations about alcohol and pregnancy*, included a textual analysis of 110 items from print newspapers, online, parenting and pregnancy websites and television news reports about alcohol and pregnancy between 1 January 2013 and 31 October 2014.

Researchers from the University of Canberra's News and Media Research Centre also conducted interviews and focus groups with 20 women based in Canberra who were pregnant, had young children or were planning a pregnancy.

Funded by the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE), the analysis found alcohol and pregnancy news coverage was typically framed in one of five ways: contested evidence and advice, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD) crisis, blaming risk-taking mothers, women's rights and community responsibility.

The most dominant framing was the focus on contested evidence and advice, with journalists highlighting contradictory medical advice and research findings about the risks of alcohol during pregnancy, as well as the confusion among women about what advice they should follow, often without discussion or explanation.

Interviews and focus groups examined the factors that influenced the women's understanding and behaviours in relation to alcohol consumption during pregnancy, including their responses to health advice and media messaging.

Lead researcher, Dr Kate Holland said it was apparent that media reporting is one source of contradictory information that informs women's views and beliefs.

“Of the 110 news items analysed, only 44 stories mentioned that women are currently advised not to drink, and of those only 20 mentioned the Australian alcohol guidelines specifically. It was clear from our research that some women draw on contested evidence conveyed through the media to explain their belief that the occasional alcoholic drink during pregnancy is safe and to question the abstinence message,” Dr Holland said.

The ACT launch today of *Women Want to Know* will go some way to providing women with clear messaging that not drinking while pregnant is the safest option.

Funded by the Australian Government Department of Health and supported by the ACT Government under the ACT Health Promotion Grants Program, the campaign was developed by FARE in conjunction with leading health colleges in 2014 to ensure that women receive clear and consistent information from health professionals about the risks alcohol consumption during pregnancy.

Alcohol consumption during pregnancy is linked to adverse consequences such as miscarriage, stillbirth, low birth weights and FASD. There is no known safe time during pregnancy, or safe level of alcohol consumption where damage to the fetus will not occur.

For these reasons, Australian health guidelines recommend that for women who are pregnant or planning pregnancy, not drinking alcohol is the safest option.

FARE Chief Executive, Michael Thorn says awareness of this advice remains low, with one in five Australian women continuing to drink alcohol after becoming aware of their pregnancy.

“The University of Canberra research again highlights that women are receiving information on alcohol and pregnancy from many sources and much of it is contradictory. The *Women Want to Know* campaign in the ACT is important because it will educate health professionals about the effects of alcohol consumption during pregnancy and encourage them to relay this information to their patients,” Mr Thorn said.

Launching the campaign in Canberra today, ACT Deputy Chief Minister Simon Corbell MLA, said investment in the program was further evidence of the ACT Government’s focus and commitment to reducing alcohol harms in the Territory.

“It is my great pleasure to launch the *Women Want to Know* campaign in the ACT. Each year more than 5,000 babies are born in the region and the ACT Government is committed to reducing the impact of alcohol-related harm on unborn and newborn babies. Our investment in this campaign will provide support and training for local medical professionals and ensure that women receive clear advice about the risk of alcohol consumption during pregnancy, to remove any uncertainty they may have,” Mr Corbell said.



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The **Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE)** is an independent, not-for-profit organisation working to stop the harm caused by alcohol. Alcohol harm in Australia is significant. Over 5,500 lives are lost every year and more than 157,000 people are hospitalised making alcohol one of our nation's greatest preventative health challenges.

For over a decade, FARE has been working with communities, governments, health professionals and police across the country to stop alcohol harms by supporting world-leading research, raising public awareness and advocating for changes to alcohol policy. In that time FARE has helped more than 750 communities and organisations, and backed over 1,400 projects around Australia.