

AUGUST 2017 RESEARCH REFLECTION:

**Raising Awareness of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) in New Zealand**

By Trish Jamieson

September 9<sup>th</sup> has been recognised as International FASD Awareness Day [www.fan.org.nz](http://www.fan.org.nz).

Awareness of FASD has been growing since the early 1990s in New Zealand (NZ). FASD is the result of permanent damage to the central nervous system (including the brain) to the unborn child, when a woman consumes alcohol during pregnancy.

My interest started in Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) some 20 years ago when I worked at a treatment programme in Christchurch. During this time I worked with children whose parents were in treatment for addictions. Many of these children were struggling at school and being labelled as “bad or naughty”. These kids got under my skin in a positive way, so as I continued to study this topic my interest and awareness of FASD increased. Anita Gibbs and Kesia Sherwood capture the development of awareness of FASD in Aotearoa New Zealand in their article:

“Putting Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) on the Map in New Zealand: A Review of Health, Social, Political, Justice and Cultural Developments”.

<https://canfasd.ca/wp-content/uploads/sites/35/2017/06/Putting-FASD-on-the-Map-in-New-Zealand.pdf>

International and national research highlights the need for a multi-disciplinary team (MDT) approach when working with a child/young person/adult with FASD symptoms. A MDT includes bringing expertise from professional fields including medical, psychological, behavioural, learning and social to enable an assessment and diagnosis to take place. Few clinicians are trained in this field in NZ therefore, lack of access to services means few children get the appropriate interventions to help them thrive. Unfortunately these children when undiagnosed or misdiagnosed grow to be troubled individuals who often end up in the court system and isolated experiencing many secondary conditions.

Gibbs and Sherwood discuss how different professional bodies in NZ are now responding to the effects of alcohol consumption on the unborn child. Their journal article initially discusses how the

awareness of FASD has been championed by people like Christine Rogan (Alcohol Healthwatch), Shirley Winikeri (a grandmother of a child with FASD) and Teina Pora's story during 2014/15. They then specifically discuss how this awareness has developed in the context of health, social, political, justice and cultural developments to date.

The authors state the risk of a child developing FASD symptoms is 1 in 20 pregnancies, equating to 570 babies born each year in NZ. These children need to be identified as early as possible so individualised interventions can be put in place for the child, family/whānau and any other person supporting this child. This article is a must for people working in education and helping systems throughout NZ.