

## **Deeble Issues Brief No. 28: Reducing harms related to alcohol use in pregnancy – policy and practice recommendations**

**Dr Amy Finlay-Jones**, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, FASD Research Australia Centre of Research Excellence, Telethon Kids Institute. Email: amy.finlay-jones@telethonkids.org.au

This issues brief outlines opportunities for change to support reduction of harms related to alcohol use in pregnancy, including the prevention of fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD). The brief aligns with National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) Guidelines that recommend alcohol abstinence when pregnant or planning a pregnancy. A co-ordinated and multi-level prevention approach is recommended.

### **Raising Awareness of the Risks of Alcohol Use in Pregnancy**

- Approximately 50% of Australian pregnancies are alcohol exposed at some point, despite NHMRC Guidelines recommending abstinence.
- There is a need for coherent health policy that highlights the potential risks of alcohol use in pregnancy and communicates that there is no established safe level of alcohol use when pregnant.
- This must be complemented by implementation and evaluation of targeted prevention efforts that take determinants of alcohol use in pregnancy into account.

### **Improving alcohol screening and referral practices in antenatal care**

- Universal screening for alcohol consumption during pregnancy enables alcohol use to be assessed in a standardized way and provides an opportunity for education and support to reduce drinking.
- There is a need for ongoing capacity building within the health system to enable implementation of alcohol screening, education, and provision of appropriate support.

### **Improving population-level surveillance**

- The current lack of nationally consistent data on alcohol use among pregnant women in the Australian population limits diagnostic capacity for FASD as well as hindering understanding who is at risk, what the determinants of alcohol use behaviours are, and whether prevention efforts are working.
- The Perinatal National Minimum Data Set should specify the mandatory collection and reporting of alcohol in pregnancy data (including timing and dose of alcohol use) to the National Perinatal Data Collection
- This data should be used in combination with other perinatal data to identify risk factors associated with alcohol use in pregnancy, develop and evaluate targeted prevention efforts; and provide population-based insights into the relationships between exposure and outcome.