
Peter Dunne

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Good evening.

It is a privilege to be here tonight for this important event, launching Taking Action on Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder: 2016-2019. I would like to start by thanking you all for joining me here this evening.

The representation in this room is humbling. It reflects not only how important this issue is, but the willingness across communities, sectors, industries and agencies to work together to make a difference.

This commitment to collaboration has not only helped to shape this Action Plan, but will be a critical component in its success.

Preventing FASD and supporting those affected by it is everyone’s business.

We conservatively estimate that FASD costs our society $800 million annually.

While that is a significant figure, it still underestimates the impact of FASD on people’s lives and New Zealand as a whole.

It is a national tragedy that around 570 children are born each year with their bodies and brains permanently damaged by alcohol.

We want every child to have the best possible start – not to start their lives on the back foot.

Giving children the best start possible has been a key goal of this Government since 2009, be it through improving immunisation rates, creating warmer healthier homes or extending free primary care to under 13s, and this Action Plan is another significant step in investing in our children.

I welcome this Action Plan as our first national attempt to turn the tide for a better start for young New Zealanders.

The Action Plan
Given that each case of FASD is avoidable, our first priority has to be prevention.

Currently 50 percent of pregnancies are exposed to alcohol.

We need to be doing a lot more.

Consistency of messaging, particularly from health professionals, is crucial.

But effective prevention goes far beyond simply telling women not to drink while pregnant.

This is not solely a women’s issue – it is an issue for all of us.
We all need to work together to create a context and culture that supports families and whānau to have healthy, alcohol-free pregnancies.

We all need to recognise and address the wider social determinants that play a role in our attitude to drinking.

We need to ensure that every New Zealander understands the risks of drinking during pregnancy and can access help if they need it.

We do not want to stigmatise or judge women or families who have a problem with alcohol and drugs.

Instead we need to remove barriers and improve the accessibility and responsiveness of our services.

As part of our commitment to preventing FASD, Government has allocated $12 million over the next four years to increase support to pregnant women and families with significant alcohol and drug issues and complex needs.

Our other priority has to be supporting those affected by this disorder.

In New Zealand, as in many other countries, FASD often goes undetected.

It may be mistaken for something else or may not be recognised at all.

While difficult to do, diagnosis can have real benefits.

Understanding the needs and strengths of the person affected by it is the first step in developing appropriate supports.

The Action Plan focuses on building New Zealand’s capacity to recognise and respond to FASD and other neurodevelopmental impairments.

This means training for frontline professionals, investing in diagnostic capacity and capability and developing cross-agency pathways of care and support.

Effective support requires a joined up approach.

Through the Action Plan the Ministries of Health, Justice, Social Development, Education and Primary Industries as well as the Police, the Department of Corrections and the Health Promotion Agency have committed to working together to better prevent FASD and support those affected.

The principles, priorities and actions in the Action Plan provide a framework to join up efforts across sectors, organisations and communities.

To support these efforts, and ensure investments are being made where they are most likely to have an impact, the Action Plan also focuses on improving New Zealand’s understanding of FASD through better evidence.

The 570 children currently estimated as affected could be the tip of the iceberg – but we need to better data to get an accurate picture.

A first step is to invest in an incidence study, where we will be investigating the neurodevelopment of a representative cohort of children.

Not only will this give us a better idea of the size of the problem but will also help us to test assessment protocols, screening tools, care pathways and support packages.

One of the things I am the most proud of is that this Action Plan aims high.

We have set ourselves some ambitious goals over the next three years but I am confident we will achieve them.
I am confident because we are not starting from scratch.

Thanks to many of the people in this room, as well as some who could not join us today, we have a strong foundation to build on.

The Health Promotion Agency is a key partner in this Action Plan and has been leading work in the alcohol and pregnancy space for some time now.

I would like to acknowledge the work they, and their Sector Leaders Group, have been doing to build consensus around the risks of drinking during pregnancy and support people to be agents of change.

I want to acknowledge the alcohol industry, of which representatives are here today.

They know my expectation that the industry steps up and contributes to being a part of the solution and have been constructively engaged in the development of the Action Plan.

I would also like to acknowledge Christine Rogan who has been working tirelessly for over a decade to raise people’s awareness of FASD and build community and clinical capacity.

She has been an invaluable resource during the development of the Action Plan and will continue to be involved as we implement it.

Last, but by no means least, I would like to acknowledge the FASD Care Action Network (FASD-CAN).

Your insights and experience have helped to keep the people most affected by this issue at the heart of the Action Plan.

Your dedication and determination is inspiring.

We are committed to working with you as we turn this Action Plan into a reality and ensure that the people affected by FASD get the support they need to live the best possible lives.

Once again, I would like to thank everyone for joining with me today to launch this important Action Plan.

There is much to do, but together I have no doubt that we can achieve the goals it contains.

Thank you.