



Media release

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Criminalising pregnant women for drinking alcohol wrong response

Criminalising pregnant women for drinking alcohol will not solve the problem, says Alcohol Healthwatch.

“These women need compassion and treatment – not blame and imprisonment,” says Director Rebecca Williams

“There is no evidence that punishing someone addicted to a substance will deter them. On the contrary it is very likely to drive them further away from the help they need,” says.

Ms Williams is commenting on a landmark case heading to the Court of Appeal in the United Kingdom (UK). The court will consider whether to criminalise women who continue to drink excessively during pregnancy against medical advice. This has stemmed from a local council seeking compensation for a 6 year old girl whose exposure to alcohol in the womb resulted in brain damage.

Alcohol Healthwatch works to address drinking during pregnancy and its consequences –known as fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD) – in New Zealand.

Ms Williams says women who cannot stop drinking during pregnancy are often those who are most vulnerable in our society.

“They are likely to have an addiction and other issues such as mental health problems and may be exposed to violence. Prosecution is simply not the answer to this complex problem and we cannot respond to this issue in isolation.”

She says New Zealand, like the UK, allows its population to be bombarded with messages to drink alcohol and has a culture which pressures people to consume alcohol in order to fit in.

“We allow easy access to cheap alcohol almost any time of the day or night. We do not require the alcohol industry to provide meaningful information on their products to warn of the dangers. In addition, women are given inconsistent advice from health professionals about alcohol consumption during pregnancy.”

She says before even considering prosecution, society must ensure it is addressing things that encourage drinking, such as alcohol pricing, availability and marketing.

“We must also ensure consumers are provided with clear and consistent advice by health professionals, and that information is provided on alcohol containers about the real risks of consuming this drug.”

Ends.

Contact for further comment or information

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