***A Wish for this Festive Season***

***Jeff McMullen***

Festive season cheer – let’s face it, alcohol – can lead to the conception of children. It can also damage not only one or two but three generations of your offspring.

The revolutionary science of epigenetics informs us that men and women, just like mice, rats, fish, chickens, guinea pigs, dogs, ferrets, pigs and non-human primates, are susceptible to the brain damage known as fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD).

Professor Kelly Huffman of the University of California, is among a number of scientists to establish that exposure to alcohol *in utero* can not only severely harm the brain and body size of the first baby, but through the epigenetic effect, intellectual impairment, anxiety, depression and motor skill problems can be passed on to grandchildren and great grandchildren.

Over the past twenty years in my post-television work in health and education, I have met large numbers of FASD children, their families and carers. I became an Ambassador for the organisation, NOFASD, because I learned that most Australians about to have a child have little knowledge of FASD

According to one of Australia’s leading paediatric specialists on FASD, Dr Heidi Webster of the Sunshine Coast Hospital and Health Service, just two binge drinking sessions anytime during the first trimester is enough to cause FASD.

As almost 60 per cent of Australian couples have unplanned pregnancies, Webster says many women and their partners have no idea of the pregnancy, especially as early as day 18 after conception when alcohol is massively harmful to the vulnerable embryo.

If day 18 is a date with danger, there is no safe time during pregnancy for consumption of alcohol. If you want the healthiest child, no alcohol is the best answer.

This is why Australians and New Zealanders should celebrate the 2020 achievement of becoming among the first societies on earth to mandate an explicit pregnancy warning label on alcohol. Regrettably, the power of the grog industry and the weakness of our political class, have delayed the introduction of this simple warning until 2023. The Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE) suggests that this timeframe exposes another quarter of a million Australian pregnancies to possible harm from alcohol.

We are yet to see the most widely recognised test for FASD applied across Australia and so estimates of the number of damaged brains range from half a million to almost 1.8 million. Of the 3 million Australian children born over the past decade by the most conservative estimate at least 105,000 of them have brain damage caused by alcohol.

FASD is linked to childhood suicide, violence and disruption in their families, impulsive behaviour that makes schooling near impossible, and sees many kids drift without treatment into juvenile crime and then prison. Assessments in Western Australia’s Banksia Hill Detention Centre revealed that about one in three young detainees have FASD impairment and more than half have similar mental illnesses. I spoke with young people sent to jail in NSW, Queensland and the Northern Territory who had no understanding of why they were locked up. A striking feature of FASD brain damage is that the child cannot connect cause and effect. Through no fault of their own their lives are ruined.

In the Northern Territory, the last frontier for expanding grog sales, Woolworth’s alcohol division, Endeavour Drinks Group, has spent five years trying to build one of the biggest liquor barns in the country within walking distance of three dry Aboriginal communities.

A Dan Murphy’s smack in the middle of Australia’s highest levels of alcohol abuse has raised the ire of the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education, Danila Dilba Health Service, NT Council of Social Services, Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance and Aboriginal Peak Organisations NT, as well as over 135,000 members of the Australian public signing on to a petition condemning this proposal.

Top End drinkers consume per capita 11.6 litres of pure alcohol per year compared to 9.5 litres in the rest of the nation. This is inextricably linked to an annual social damage bill of some $1.3 billion dollars in the NT alone.

I would like to send a festive season message to the NT Chief Minister, Michael Gunner, asking what happened to his commitment to a moratorium on new liquor licences? To Woolworths and Dan Murphy’s I say, you are the ‘fresh food people’, riding high on profits and with a commitment to a ‘green’ future, how can you blithely ignore the health risks to three generations?

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