



Dealing with Foetal Alcohol Syndrome

Presented by Hanlie Snyman from the Institute for Disability Innovation

Carnarvon, Northern Cape, South Africa

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In the past when you asked people where Carnarvon was, they would answer: it's halfway between nothing and nowhere, it takes only several bottles of water to drive from Cape Town to the dry town of Carnarvon. When you ask people these days where Carnarvon is, then they answer: Carnarvon is a small town in the Karoo in the Northern Cape, the new home of one of the Earth's biggest science projects, the Square Kilometre Array (SKA), and it only takes an hour to fly from Cape Town to Carnarvon.

We in Carnarvon are so privileged to have the SKA with us. You will read and hear in the media, about all the job opportunities SKA brings to our community in Carnarvon, more than 500 international astronomers submitted proposals, which will bring jobs. SKA awarded close to 400 grants in 2012, for studies in astronomy and engineering from undergraduate to post-doctoral level, while also investing in training programmes for technicians, and so can I go on and on...

Sadly, our community in Carnarvon is still jobless, unemployed, why can't we be part of all these wonderful opportunities that are on our doorstep?

I am Hanlie Snyman from the Institute for Disability Innovation in Carnarvon Northern Cape. Thank you for this opportunity to speak to you about Foetal Alcohol Syndrome and the consequences thereof.

Scientific studies indicate that South Africa has the highest reported incidence of Foetal Alcohol Syndrome in the world. An estimated 25 000 babies are born with FAS every year. The study shows that 12.2% of the people in De Aar have FAS. This is the highest in the world. In comparison, the United States of America's rate of the syndrome is lower than 1%.

Drinking alcohol during pregnancy, regardless of quantity, can cause permanent brain damage. There is no cure for FAS. The damage will stay with the child for life. The consequences of drinking during pregnancy are severe.

There are 3 characteristics by which a FAS person can be identified, namely: growth retardation (before and after birth), facial characteristics and neurological effects namely permanent brain damage.

Persons with FAS therefore, have a lifelong disability, they will never be normal. Typical neurological disabilities that occur are: neurological damage resulting in a low level of intelligence, the person is physically disabled, visually impaired, hearing impaired, cannot learn, organ such as the heart are affected, they have behavioural problems, social problems, cannot receive, remember and execute tasks, they have no money sense, they cannot think and reason logically.

Secondary problems also exist, for example: school dropouts, unplanned pregnancies especially among young schoolgirls, cruel rapes, unemployment as well as trouble with the law.

Written FAS literature in South Africa is minimal. There are very few FAS statistics available. There are no professionals to perform screenings or diagnostic evaluations in the rural areas. Therefore is it very difficult to tell exactly how many South Africans are suffering from this syndrome.

I'm asking:

- Is the Department of Social Development neglecting its duty as the lead department in coordinating and implementing interventions for this problem?
- Are health professionals equipped to do the necessary screening and to perform the evaluation diagnosis correctly? If not, then who will do the screening and evaluations correctly without labelling children incorrectly?
- Is there educational support from the Department of Education available for FAS children in schools, because drop outs, drug abuse, crime and teenage pregnancy amongst the youth in South Africa are a reality?

Are we doing enough to stop FAS? The time has come to not just raise awareness about the problem and hand out information, we have to stop FAS. How? The **only way** to prevent FAS 100% is when the mother does not drink any alcohol during her pregnancy. Therefore there is a need for a FAS awareness, support and prevention skills training programme for pregnant women.

Mr John Block MEC for Finance, Economic Development and Tourism in the Northern Cape says: and I quote:

“Provincially, the unemployment rate has increased from 28.4% in the fourth quarter of 2012 to 29.6% in the first quarter of 2013. Year-on-year, the picture is unchanged. According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO) the world is facing a worsening youth unemployment crisis with young people likely to be three times more unemployed than adults. Youth unemployment, as a measure of those aged 15-34 years, stood at 34.5% in 2011 in our province and 38.4% nationally according to Stats SA. This is an improvement in youth unemployment from 2001 when it measured 44.1%.”

Is this because of Foetal Alcohol Syndrome?

I read an article in the City Press, the heading says, “Carnarvon looks to the stars” The SKA will bring a lot of construction jobs, but the town’s biggest money-spinner is the bottle store!”

Kareeberg Municipality (Carnarvon) Integrated Development plan 2011 – 2016 says the health problems in Kareeberg are:

- Alcohol abuse
- An increasing number of teenage pregnancies
- A low usage of family planning methods
- A high incidence of chronic diseases such as hypertension and diabetes
- Malnutrition and a high incidence of children older than 5 years not gaining weight
- A high incidence of low birth-weight babies

Stats SA 2013 says:

Three of the provinces, Free State, KwaZulu-Natal, Western Cape and Limpopo, saw a decrease in the unemployment rate, while in Eastern Cape, unemployment rates increased by 1,9% and in the Northern Cape the unemployment rate increased by 4,7 percentage points.

Are we in Carnarvon, Northern Cape missing out on wonderful job opportunities because of our mothers that are drinking during pregnancy? Everybody knows that FAS is 100% preventable, but it is also 100% irreversible. Why on earth are mothers drinking while they are pregnant? Stop it, don’t be selfish. Stop giving birth to disable babies, and start delivering world class leaders.

I thank you.