

Journalists' guide for reporting on alcohol harms in pregnancy and Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)

Authors:

Fiona Robards^{1,2}, Kim Morris³, Louise Gray⁴, Kate Lewis⁵, Jessica Birch², Luisa Low⁶, Heather D'Antoine², Elizabeth Paton^{7,8}, Elizabeth Elliott^{1,2,9}

¹Child and Adolescent Health, Faculty of Medicine and Health, The University of Sydney, Westmead, NSW Australia, ²FASD Research Australia, NHMRC Centre of Research Excellence, Sydney, NSW, Australia, ³FASD Hub, Australia, ⁴NOFASD, Australia, ⁵Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE), Canberra, ACT, Australia, ⁶The Media Office, The University of Sydney, Camperdown, NSW, Australia, ⁷Everymind, Newcastle, NSW, Australia, ⁸School of Humanities, Creative Industries and Social Sciences, College of Human and Social Futures, University of Newcastle, Callaghan, NSW, Australia, ⁹CICADA Centre, Sydney Children's Hospital Network, Westmead, NSW, Australia

Presenter's email: fiona.robards@sydney.edu.au

Background: Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition caused by prenatal alcohol exposure. The way journalists communicate about FASD matters - language can either promote dignity and understanding, or unintentionally reinforce shame, blame and misinformation.

Description of Intervention: This guide offers practical tools for journalists and health communicators to report on alcohol use in pregnancy and FASD with accuracy, respect and compassion. It promotes positive framing and inclusive language that recognises the expertise of people with lived experience, encourages informed discussion, and supports hope and inclusion.

Implementation: The project will develop and disseminate a practical, evidence-based guide for journalists on reporting alcohol use in pregnancy and FASD. It will:

- offer guidance on language and framing to avoid stigma and misinformation.
- include links to authoritative resources to provide clear, accurate information on the risks of alcohol use in pregnancy and FASD.
- include culturally sensitive approaches for reporting on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
- use co-design to engage key stakeholders and media professionals, and
- promote the guide through media networks, journalist associations, and professional development.

Conclusion and Next Steps: Including the voices and perspectives of people with lived experience of FASD in media reporting is essential for building public understanding of strengths, needs and diverse experiences. Real-life stories can reduce stigma, challenge stereotypes and highlight the systemic barriers people face—such as limited support, missed diagnoses and lack of FASD-informed services.

Implications on communities, practice, policy and/or First Nations

communities: Reporting that focuses solely on deficits or negative experiences can contribute to stigma by implying fault, highlighting limitations without context, or portraying people with FASD as defined only by their challenges. Strengths-based, person-centred reporting by journalists supports dignity, reduces prejudice and helps the public understand the broader social, cultural and structural contexts surrounding alcohol use in pregnancy.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

Financial support: This work is supported by a National Health and Medical Research Council of Australia Centre of Research Excellence in Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (#2044613). EJE is supported by a National Health and Medical Research Council of Australia Leadership Fellowship (#2026176). The FASD NSW service is supported by the Australian Department of Health and Ageing (#4-GJK5SHC). EP is employed by Everymind,

which administers the Mindframe program, supported by the Department of Health, Disability and Ageing under the National Suicide Prevention Leadership and Support Program.