

Fetal alcohol syndrome tackled

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New prevention, treatment measures lauded by leading pediatrician

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It's not hard to see the effects of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder in this province.

You can see it in our jails, at our soup kitchens, in our mental health facilities and in our funeral homes.

The fallout from FASD is also seen often in the Dr. Nicole LeBlanc's examining rooms.

"FASD is the leading cause of mental deficiencies in the (western) world," the head of pediatrics at the Dr. Georges-L. Dumont Regional Hospital says.

"It's preventable 100 per cent. Zero consumption of alcohol during pregnancy equals zero FASD."

Yet it's a sad reality that some women drink during pregnancy, either through bad choices or thanks to alcohol addiction. The result can be children with physical ailments, poor learning skills, bad decision-making abilities and more, leading to a life of mental illness, crime, addictions and even suicide.

LeBlanc and provincial Minister of Health Mary Schryer announced an FASD centre of excellence this week that will bring all resources against the disease together under one roof - though the services to be made available to those who need them will be based in the various New Brunswick communities, to better deliver those services directly to those who need them, Schryer said.

The centre will be created through a partnership involving the Department of Health, the two regional health authorities and a non-profit, non-government organization to be named after at the end of a request for proposals.

"After reviewing potential models and engaging in extensive consultation with provincial stakeholders, it was recommended that the Government of New Brunswick support the creation of a provincial FASD centre of excellence," Schryer told a Moncton news conference.

"FASD affects many aspects of a person's life - health, education, social interaction and work. Efforts to address FASD require the collaboration of many stakeholder and community groups, and I am pleased that we have so many partners as we move ahead together."

The centre's mission will be to prevent alcohol-exposed births. For those that aren't prevented, the centre will provide appropriate diagnoses and build community capacity to work with individuals, families and caregivers affected by FASD.

The agency that will deliver the program will be chosen by a request for proposals to be issued shortly. The province chose to go with a non-governmental, non-profit agency to deliver the model because such agencies already have years of expertise in delivering services directly in communities. Many of them already have a wealth of experience dealing with individuals and families affected by FASD. The winning proponent will also be responsible for infrastructure, such as the centre of excellence's location, office building and the like.

The RHAs will be responsible for providing some of the required specialized clinical services and expertise.

LeBlanc doesn't even try to contain her enthusiasm for the move. It's one for which she's fought for 13 years.

For once, she says, "everyone will be at the same table," including doctors, a community co-ordinator, therapists, psychologists and more.

"It's a marvellous, marvellous project," LeBlanc says, mostly because it will be community-based and will address a specific, critical problem that has suffered from a scattergun approach in the past to the extent that no one can say how many FASD-sufferers exist in New Brunswick.

Some studies estimate that 10 per cent or more of the population suffer from some aspects of FASD. Other studies peg the figure at one per cent.

"That number, we think, is underestimated," LeBlanc says.

Schryer was reluctant to put a price tag on the project. The province has set aside "more than a half-million dollars" to kick-start it, but it might cost more, she said. The results of the RFP, to be issued as soon as possible, will determine that.

Diagnosis and treatment can be difficult as the disorder manifests itself in a variety of ways, ranging from behavioural problems to brain and central nervous system disabilities.

"These kids are out there," LeBlanc says, "and right now they are probably being under-diagnosed."

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