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## **DOLLS DEPICT DAMAGE CAUSED BY FETAL ALCOHOL SYNDROME**

As a neonatal nurse, Louise Carleton has seen firsthand the devastating effects of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) – infants born prematurely, with tiny bodies, tiny heads and tiny brains, doomed to a lifetime of developmental and behavioral difficulties.

In 1997, Louise joined forces with her husband, Stephen, to start “A Pregnant Pause,” a program that educates middle-school and high-school students and others about the potential consequences of consuming even one alcoholic beverage while pregnant.

The program is funded through the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services.

The star attraction in the Carleton’s presentation is the FAS manikin, an extremely detailed, lifelike representation of an infant born with FAS. Marketed through a Wisconsin company called “Baby Think It Over, Inc.,” the FAS doll was designed by Louise and gives teenagers a realistic picture of how drinking alcohol during pregnancy can have lasting physical and mental effects on an infant.

During their presentation, the Carletons compare the FAS manikin with a “normal” infant. Whereas a “normal” infant typically averages 7 pounds, an FAS infant weighs about 4 pounds. A normal baby measures between 19-21 inches, has a head

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circumference of 15 centimeters, one-inch eyes and a one-inch space between the eyes. An FAS infant, on the other hand, measures 15-17 inches, has a head circumference of 12 centimeters, three-quarter-inch eyes and a two-inch space between the eyes. FAS infants also are undernourished and have little joint rotation.

“Facial features develop during the first month of pregnancy,” Louise said. “If the mother drinks during that month, the baby’s face may be deformed. Major development of the organs takes place during the first trimester, so drinking during that time can severely damage the heart, limbs and other vital organs.”

The most damage by far, though, is done to the brain.

When a pregnant woman drinks alcohol, the alcohol travels through the bloodstream and passes through the placenta, allowing the baby to absorb the same amount of alcohol. “It may be in small amounts, but if consumed at the right time in cellular development, it can severely damage developing organs,” Louise said.

Although FAS is characterized by facial deformities, babies born with Fetal Alcohol Effects (FAE), another alcohol-related disorder, don’t display obvious physical abnormalities, Stephen added.

“Since 1973, the problem with FAE has become seven times worse. Kids with FAE are seen as ‘normal,’ yet they have a dickens of a time going through the normal thinking process. They have fantastic memories, but they don’t know what the words mean. Alcohol is worse than any drug. Drugs distort the cells during development, but

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alcohol destroys them so there is no connection.”

Symptoms of FAE include hyperactivity, learning disorder, delay in development or mental retardation. “These children cannot problem-solve, so knowing right from wrong is difficult,” he said.

Awareness of FAS and FAE dates back to the 1800s, when people in England noticed that women who drank large amounts of gin had miscarriages or unsuccessful pregnancies. Research on FAS and FAE began in 1960, yet surveys continue to show an increase in FAS and FAE, and increased drinking among young women who are pregnant, Stephen said.

“People have so many misconceptions about FAS and FAE,” he said. “Some people think FAS is inherited or that one drink won’t hurt. The safest thing to do is to avoid alcohol entirely. Because both FAS and FAE are 100 percent preventable, awareness is key. If there is no alcohol exposure during pregnancy, there are no alcohol-related disorders. When people think about FAS, they think about infants, yet they also need to think about the lasting implications – behavior and learning disorders, and ongoing medical problems.”

To schedule a program with the Carletons, call (405) 844-9064.

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