



Speech by

Hon. Liddy Clark

MEMBER FOR CLAYFIELD

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MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Foetal Alcohol Syndrome

Hon. E.A. CLARK (Clayfield—ALP) (Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy) (10.22 a.m.): There are many aspects of this portfolio that are challenging. There are many people struggling with the legacy of policies of the past that put an end to their family and to their homeland ties. But an issue that I find to be as frightening as any other is foetal alcohol syndrome. This, of course, is not an issue confined to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities; it is an issue wherever women drink to harmful levels during pregnancy.

Alcohol consumption during pregnancy can cause foetal alcohol syndrome, regarded as the leading, preventable cause of non-genetic intellectual impairment. It is not curable. Children born with foetal alcohol syndrome are often born with distinctive physical characteristics and they can have growth retardation, ongoing behavioural problems, and organ defects. In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities where alcohol is a critical problem, foetal alcohol syndrome is also likely to be a major issue. Children can be cheated and held back by the effects of alcohol before their lives have even begun.

I had the privilege of attending a consultative forum on alcohol use in pregnancy, held on International Foetal Alcohol Syndrome Day on 9 September. As the forum heard, the effects of foetal alcohol syndrome are devastating. It affects not only the child's health but also the education system, the foster system, the justice system and almost every reach of people's lives. One study found that the cost generated by one child with foetal alcohol syndrome over the child's lifetime was around \$2 million and the social costs are just as critical. While there is no cure or recognised treatment for the syndrome, some of the effects can be treated as they arise.

Foetal alcohol syndrome is 100 per cent preventable. We need to raise awareness of the syndrome and increase the amount of research being done, because understanding the problem and its magnitude is one of the tools we can use to fight it. There is some excellent work being done by people, including those who addressed the forum. Most of this work has taken the form of education programs where they are needed the most—among pregnant women and other people within communities so that the knowledge shared is not lost.

The Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy will work with Queensland Health and other state government agencies to see that this syndrome gets the attention it needs. I thank my colleague the honourable Minister for Health for his support and efforts in this area, and particularly for his department's support for the research being done at the Apunipima Cape York Health Centre. There is hard work ahead in fighting this syndrome, but this government is committed to taking a coordinated approach to meeting these challenges and to stopping the grip of foetal alcohol syndrome on all Queenslanders.