

# Supporting the message: 'alcohol and pregnancy don't mix'

By Carol Barnett and Jane Forbes

*Women are faced with conflicting advice on how much alcohol is safe in pregnancy so in November 2008, Alcohol Focus Scotland ran a campaign to deliver their message that 'alcohol and pregnancy don't mix'.*

**H**ow confusing must it be for pregnant women? Who do they listen to when they want advice about aspects of their lifestyle when so-called 'expert' professional bodies give different advice?

Within the UK there are conflicting messages about how much alcohol is safe in pregnancy. The Department of Health (DH, 2008) gives the advice that pregnant women or women trying to conceive should avoid drinking alcohol. However, if they do choose to drink, they should not drink more than 1–2 units of alcohol once or twice a week and should not get drunk. This advice perhaps only serves to dilute the message of avoiding alcohol in pregnancy. Additional advice from the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE, 2008) advises women to avoid alcohol, particularly in the first three months, because of the increased risk of miscarriage but then recommends no more than a maximum limit of 1–2 units of alcohol once or twice a week.

In Scotland the message is clearer with both the Scottish Government (Health Scotland, 2009) and the Royal College of Midwives (RCM, 2008) now saying that no alcohol is safe in pregnancy.

Alcohol is neurotoxic to the brain during the developmental stage and there is an established recognized link between heavy alcohol intake and the risk of fetal alcohol syndrome and fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (BMA, 2007). What is less clear are the risks associated with small amounts of alcohol during pregnancy. A recent UK study (Kelly et al, 2008) suggests that babies of women with alcohol consumption of no more than 1–2 units per week during preg-

nancy were not at increased risk of behaviour or cognitive deficits. Conversely, a number of US studies report adverse affects of alcohol on fetal development from levels of less than one drink per day (Charness et al, 1994; Day, 1995; Wong et al, 1995).

Throughout the UK there has been conflicting advice from professional bodies as to what level of alcohol is safe in pregnancy but the consensus of opinion now in Scotland is that we do not have clear evidence on safe limits, therefore, the only way to ensure a baby is not damaged by alcohol is for women to abstain from drinking it completely during pregnancy.

In order to promote the message that 'alcohol and pregnancy don't mix' a campaign run by Alcohol Focus Scotland took place in November 2008 and was supported by both the maternity and public health directorates of NHS Tayside, Scotland.

## Health promotion events

Alcohol Focus Scotland is a Scottish charity dedicated to raising awareness of, and reducing the significant health and social

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harm caused by alcohol. It works in partnership with the Scottish government's health department, particularly around issues of communication. When it launched a campaign promoting the message of no alcohol in pregnancy offering free information leaflets and posters, it was felt that this was an ideal opportunity to support the message in Tayside.

The midwives involved had no difficulty in gaining support from colleagues to hold alcohol information events in each of the four maternity units. Posters and leaflets for

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Figure 1. Jane Forbes [left] and Carol Barnett, Arbroath Community Midwives Unit

this campaign were displayed and distributed together with a wide variety of other information on alcohol (Figure 1). A small 'Health Promoting Health Service' grant from the directorate of public health was applied for and awarded, which enabled pens and balloons to be printed with the no alcohol in pregnancy message. Having a stall that had a number of resources as well as free gifts added to the overall appeal.

### Resources

Resources such as 'what is a unit' (Figure 2) where a unit of alcohol was clearly shown in a variety of different glasses. This resource proved to be quite an eye-opener for many who did not realize just how much alcohol could be in one glass. 'What mummy does baby does' is a model showing how alcohol, drugs and tobacco cross the placenta to the fetus and proved to be an effective tool for delivering this important message (Figure 3).

While the aim was to give ideas for alternatives both in the preconception period and during pregnancy the opportunity was also taken to spread the messages of safe levels of drinking and not drinking while driving too. Alcohol unit calculators and measure guides, which had been produced for alcohol awareness week ([www.alcoholawarenessweek.com](http://www.alcoholawarenessweek.com)) were offered as free gifts. Non-alcoholic drinks (donated by local companies) were available at each event.

### Comments

Members of the public were asked to give written comments on what they thought about the message of no alcohol in pregnancy. A total of 50 comments were received. There was overwhelming agreement that alcohol should not be taken in pregnancy and a considerable number also expressed a fear of guilt should alcohol cause something to be wrong with the baby:

*'My family is now grown but for my daughter I would say NO alcohol at all. How would she feel saying to her son/daughter – looking them in the eye and saying "you are what you are because I drank?"'* (1)

*'I think drinking in pregnancy isn't appropriate. I myself would feel guilty if there was a problem with the baby, if I had been drinking and it was discovered that this could have been an effect.'* (11)



Figure 2. Learning resource showing units of alcohol (Health Edco)

*'You shouldn't touch alcohol at all when pregnant. It's not good. You should give the baby the best chance in life and stay clear.'* (20)

*'This is my first pregnancy – have had a couple of glasses of wine during pregnancy. Don't think a little alcohol would do any harm.'* (33)

Six respondents thought that a little alcohol was acceptable with comments such as:

*'Healthy babies are born every day with mothers who have a few drinks in their pregnancy. I think you have to be*



Figure 3. Model showing how alcohol crosses the placenta (Childbirth Graphics)

*sensible and look after yourself and baby. I think too many research.’ (34)*

A further six said there was too much conflicting advice:

*‘very unwise, the more info the better, but some media sources suggest one or two glasses is ok?? Daft.’ (46)*

*‘Advice on alcohol during pregnancy is generally mixed (e.g. recent media report) is there a safe limit?’ (47)*

*‘The information available is very confusing to women. Can they have a drink or not. I thought one glass of wine a day was fine – maybe not.’ (49)*

In October 2008, the BBC reported on a London study by Kelly et al (2008) and highlighted the finding that children born to mothers who drank up to 1–2 drinks per week or per occasion during pregnancy were not at an increased risk of clinically relevant behavioural difficulties or cognitive deficits compared with children of abstinent mothers. Closer reading of this article shows the authors suggest that it may be social circumstances rather than the impact of alcohol that is responsible for low rates of behavioural difficulties. Sensationalized media reporting of this kind can only further confuse an already bewildered group of women.

Concern over pressures faced by the wider population was also raised:

*‘social pressures on both women and men to drink alcoholic drinks are unacceptable [sic] high in Scotland and the UK.’ (50)*

The information events made an impression on those who visited the stall:

*‘Think this stall is an excellent idea, very informative for youngsters, mothers of teenagers along with pregnant women.’ (40)*

*‘I like the way you are putting it across today, maybe something like this in schools.’ (41)*

*‘should not drink alcohol when pregnant – need education for teenagers so useful today for that.’ (43)*

### Delivering the message

Publicity for these events was excellent with a news feature on Scottish Television News, *North Tonight* programme. A local radio station repeated an interview with the lead author throughout the first day of the event and the local evening newspaper *Evening Telegraph* (2008) provided further coverage.

Feedback from these alcohol events has been disseminated to midwives and health promotion staff throughout Tayside to encourage health professionals to work together to promote the same message.

In the absence of any definitive evidence of safe levels of alcohol in pregnancy the authors believe it is time that all health providers throughout the UK give the same message: that the only safe way to protect a baby from the harmful effects of alcohol is to abstain completely during the preconception and pregnancy period.

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