

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder in Ireland

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Dear Editor,

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is one of the most common yet under-recognised preventable neurodevelopmental conditions in Ireland³. A 2017 JAMA Pediatrics study ranked Ireland as having the third highest global prevalence of FASD¹. In the same year, our national survey found that many paediatricians and trainees were unaware of the full spectrum of this condition². Despite these warnings, little progress has been made in the last decade.

Timely diagnosis is critical for improving outcomes and providing appropriate early support. However, diagnostic services for FASD remain limited globally, and in Ireland, the absence of a national framework has created further barriers to early recognition and intervention. People living with FASD are at a far greater risk of experiencing difficulties with their mental health, substance misuse, and involvement with the criminal justice system³. International evidence suggests that individuals with the most severe forms of FASD often have a life expectancy in their 30s, with suicide being a leading cause of premature death³.

While ASD affects approximately 1% of the population, FASD affects an estimated 7%¹. FASD stands out among neurodevelopmental disorders (NDDs) due to its unique etiology—prenatal alcohol exposure—and a distinct neurocognitive and behavioural profile. Uniquely, individuals with FASD often exhibit pronounced impairments in executive functioning, memory, impulsivity, language, adaptive behaviour, and motor coordination³. This makes accurate diagnosis essential, as FASD is often mislabelled as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD).

Healthcare professionals should implement evidence-based diagnostics such as the four-digit diagnostic code developed by Prof. S Astley⁴, training for which is freely available online. It is evidence-based, with animal and human studies consistently confirming alcohol as a teratogen producing characteristic phenotypes.

FASD is a hidden disability. The most recognisable characteristics of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) are facial abnormalities: short palpebral fissures, a thin upper lip, and a smooth philtrum. However, these facial traits are only found in approximately 10% of the FASD population making FASD a hidden disability³.

Recently, FASD Ireland, in collaboration with the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI), published groundbreaking qualitative research highlighting the lived experiences of people with FASD³. These narratives underline the urgent need for improved awareness, diagnostic services, and supports. Therefore, greater recognition, professional training, and investment in diagnostic capacity are urgently needed in Ireland to address this unmet need.

Declarations of Conflicts of Interest:

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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