Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD) – A specialty area or everybody’s business?

From the perspective of a Clinical Psychologist who has worked across CAMHS and Community Paediatrics, I have been on a bit of a journey in respect of my knowledge of FASD. It might be the case that you’ve not heard much about FASD, or haven’t assessed for this before – don’t worry, you are in good company, and this blog is for you. I too thought this was a specialist area I didn’t need to know much about - I worked in CAMHS and FASD wasn’t my speciality. If you read further you will get a flavour of the pendulum swing from my perspective then, that FASD was a specialist area, to what I believe now: no matter where you work or in what profession, FASD is absolutely everybody’s business. I’ll explain why...

Unbeknown to most, FASD is likely to be the most common neurodevelopmental issue you will ever come across. Yes. That’s not a mis-type there – I will put my bottom dollar (as it’s seemingly worth more than the pound) that FASD will be more common than Autism and ADHD combined. Its presence has been described as, “hidden in plain sight,” however, I now feel it has always been in plain sight, but we have not used a neurodevelopmental lens to see it. These kids (and adults) struggle with learning, social skills, attention, executive function and have markedly low adaptive function skills compared to their patchy / low average / borderline cognitive assessment. Their sleep is usually poor and they have emotional meltdowns which just don’t seem to respond to the usual strategies. Sound familiar...?

Although in my CAMHS work I knew that alcohol in pregnancy was a ‘red flag’, I have to confess that I did not know how to assess for this condition until I was formally trained in a 2-day CPD session in 2013. This training did not require new tools of the trade, as it were, but the language and process did take a bit of practice. Frustratingly, it wasn’t a black-and-white textbook area, but - I thought to myself – “what bit of Clinical Psychology is?”

So, off we went with our newly knitted-together multidisciplinary team - stitched together by a thread of goodwill - spanning CAMHS and Paediatrics. So, in 2015 we began our specialist service. Assessing 36 children we quickly realised that the mental health and risk needs of these kids needed something different, something bigger. It needed CAMHS... and CAMHS needed Paediatrics. The conclusion of our evaluation suggested that what was needed was a neurodevelopmental service, with overlaps in both CAMHS and Community Paediatrics. Sound familiar...?

Arguably, both of these places needed people and pathways to fit the needs of a changing population. We drink in 40% of our pregnancies (15% to binge levels) and we have a whole
host of factors on top of this. This leads to lots of children with lots of elements of what we now call ‘neurodiversity’. Children with FASD are arguably the largest group, alongside those who are autistic or who struggle with attention and hyperactivity. Indeed, some may experience all three conditions...

As such, there is no alternative but to be brave and allow ourselves to look though the FASD (and neurodevelopmental) lens wherever you are. These individuals are everywhere – you just have to walk our streets to see those sitting in those doorways, alley ways or prisons to see it. These people’s needs are not currently being met, but by starting to apply this lens in our everyday lives we can gradually help to re-shape society’s approach to FASD.

Perhaps our aim is that one day FASD is a specialist and rare condition. Until then, they are everybody’s business. Thank you for reading this short blog – to find out more, you can visit our team’s website by clicking here.

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Further information:
- [NHS Ayrshire & Arran Fetal Alcohol Advisory & Support Team website](#)
- [Fetal Alcohol Advisory & Support Team Twitter](#)
- [FASD Network booklet for young adults with FASD](#)
- [Community Living booklet on supporting adults with FASD](#)
- [ACAMH podcast on FASD with Dr Jennifer Shields & Dr Sarah Brown](#)
- [FASD Hub Scotland](#)