

**Communication Campaign: A Major Tool for Social Marketing
Prince George Campaigns**

Planning Your Own Campaign - Extra Stuff

ISSUE PAPER

**TO FACILITATE DISCUSSION ON PUBLIC AWARENESS APPROACHES TO PREVENTION OF
FETAL ALCOHOL SYNDROME**

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BACKGROUND ON PREVENTION

The scope of prevention

- Prevention encompasses initiatives across a full spectrum:
 - **Primary prevention** activities are directed toward healthy populations for the purpose of raising awareness in order to avert a problem from occurring. Primary prevention also involves addressing the determinants of health, including poverty, education, employment, social and cultural factors, and lifestyle.
 - **Secondary prevention** activities are directed to people at risk and are aimed at preventing a problem from becoming severe.
 - **Tertiary prevention** activities are directed toward people at risk for the purpose of minimizing the impact of a problem that has already developed.

Approaches to raising public awareness concerning Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS):

A public awareness campaign generally falls within the scope of primary prevention, is directed toward the public at large, and may encompass a variety of prevention activities.

- Public awareness approaches may include the following:
- **Alcohol control measures** to reduce alcohol consumption. Approaches used in some jurisdictions have included increased taxation, restricted advertising, control of hours of service, etc).
- **Mandatory labeling of alcohol containers or by laws mandating posting of information**
- **Media campaigns**
- **Statements and guidelines** on risks associated with alcohol consumption distributed as pamphlets or posters.

Evaluation of public awareness approaches:

Due to problems in research design and evaluation, research on public awareness approaches has

provided mixed results. For example:

- In Canada, only the Yukon requires alcohol container warning labels; the impacts have not been evaluated.
- Since 1989, the US has had legislation requiring the labeling of alcohol containers. One study (Hankin, 1994) found an initial decrease in alcohol consumption during pregnancy in women considered to be low risk (Health Canada, December 2000). A comparative study (Graves, 1993) between the US and Ontario, where there is no mandatory labeling, found small increases in awareness in the US (Health Canada, December, 2000).
- Health Canada (December, 2000) cites studies that reviewed a variety of elective awareness campaigns in Western Canada (eg. warnings on till slips and alcohol beverage packaging) with no clear demonstration of effectiveness.
- Health Canada (December, 2000) cites studies suggesting that FAS awareness raising messages may lead to distress and anxiety in low risk women and be ineffective for women at greater risk.

Directions suggested by research to date:

- The *FAS Prevention and FAS/NAS Early Intervention Delphi Survey Report* (Children's and Women's Health Centre of BC, March 2000) ranked public awareness media campaigns as #8 out of 11 identified prevention priorities. The first identified priority was the provision of educational in-service training for professional and para-professionals including doctors, nurses, teachers, addiction counsellors, social workers, judges, probation officers, law enforcement officers, and government administrators (p. 14).
- Studies indicate that multi-component awareness strategies can raise awareness and possibly affect levels of alcohol consumption by pregnant women. Elements of multi-component strategies include: birth control and substance-specific information to men and women, prenatal and outreach services, and training of professionals (Health Canada, December, 2000).
- The relationship between alcohol consumption and fetal alcohol syndrome or other alcohol-related birth defects depends on environmental, biological, and nutritional factors as well as timing and dosage of alcohol. In other words alcohol consumption on its own, even where there is excessive and prolonged drinking during pregnancy, does not necessarily result in FAS.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF A PUBLIC AWARENESS CAMPAIGN

ADVANTAGES

- There is some suggestion that public awareness campaigns may stimulate behaviour change in the long run
- Public information may help provide support to people who are attempting to avoid alcohol and other substances
- An informed public may be more willing to support programs and expenditures that address the issues raised
- While not everyone's awareness will be heightened by public messages, everyone should have access to health promoting information

DISADVANTAGES

- The costs of a public awareness campaign may be seen as taking dollars that could otherwise be spent on vital services

- Messages that appear to blame or target women are inappropriate as well as ineffective: there is little evidence that negative messages and fear engender sustained behavioural change
- Studies have demonstrated that 70 per cent or more of women who abuse substances have been physically or sexually abused as children and many are victims of violence as adults (National Institutes of Health, 1998). What "messages" can we provide that would be helpful to these women?
- Similarly, epidemiological data suggest that the prevalence of FAS and FAE is strongly associated with poverty, unemployment, and other socio-economic factors.
- Approaches to address the overall health of "at risk" pregnant women, through programs such as the Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program (CPNP) help to address substance use, mental health, and violence issues. Evaluative studies indicate that these dollars are well spent, in contrast to the variable results from public awareness campaigns.