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Dufferin County declares Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder Awareness Day as Sept. 9

By Paula Brown

Dufferin County Council has declared Sept. 9 as Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) Awareness Day in the County of Dufferin as they look to help raise awareness and spread understanding about the invisible disability.

During their meeting on July 11, County Council was joined by Jenny Hilts and Tara Leskey from Dufferin Child and Family Services (DCAFS) to accept the proclamation.

?The proclamation helps us with our mission to raising awareness and understanding of fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, which effects four per cent of the population and is higher than the prevalence of autism,? said Hilts. ?Your commitment to this cause highlights the importance of community support in making a meaningful difference.?

International FASD Awareness Day has been recognized annually on Sept. 9 since 1999 and looks to bring global awareness to the disability. Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, or FASD, is a lifelong disability caused by exposure to alcohol prenatally, which affects the brain and body.

According to the Canada FASD Research Network, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder is the leading developmental disability, with studies suggesting that up to four per cent or 1 in 25 individuals in Canada live with FASD.

Leskey said there are approximately 4,000 individuals under the age of 18 years old who have FASD in Dufferin, Wellington and Guelph.

FASD can cause difficulty with learning, memory, impulsivity, and control. It also can impact academic achievement and social interactions.

Mono Deputy Mayor Fred Nix raised the question of whether there is any indication in studies that the prevalence of fetal alcohol spectrum disorder is on the rise.

Leskey said that the four per cent figure is likely an underestimation of the actual number of individuals living with FASD and that some studies are suggesting upwards of 7 per cent.

?A lot of families don't come forward for fear of stigma, judgment and shame. It's very difficult as well to get diagnoses. The diagnosed population is quite lower because we don't have families coming forward and we're not catching them, so often times they're misdiagnosed with other diagnoses,? said Leskey.

Hilts also noted the way the question ?did you drink during the pregnancy?? is asked, has an impact on the number of diagnoses.

?The answer is probably going to be no, but you have to ask it in a way?.like how far along were you when you found out you were pregnant because when you find out you're pregnant doesn't mean it couldn't happen before,? said Hilts.

The Canada FASD Research Network reports that over 60 per cent of all pregnancies are unplanned. The organization also reports that up to 62 per cent of women have consumed alcohol within the first three months of their pregnancy, as many women don't know their pregnant several weeks along.

On FASD Awareness Day (Sept. 9), the Dufferin Wellington Guelph FASD will be hosting a short walk in Guelph to help raise awareness for FASD.

Dufferin Wellington Guelph FASD is also participating in the Annual Red Shoes Rock initiative to help raise awareness.

Red Shoes Rock is a grassroots movement started by Canadian educator and advocate RJ Formanek, who wore red shoes on an international stage to discuss FASD. The movement gained international recognition as a way to bring attention to the disability.

For more information on FASD and support services available locally, visit www.dufferinwellingtonfasd.com.