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Studies examine fetal alcohol syndrome in South Africa

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Two recently published studies report prevalence data about fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD) in South Africa and find that negative consequences of prenatal exposure to alcohol may be lessened if a child is provided with adequate nutrition and appropriate cognitive and behavioral stimulation in his or her first seven years of life.

Dr. Philip A. May, faculty member at the University of North Carolina's Nutrition Research Institute (NRI), research professor of nutrition at the Gillings School of Global Public Health and Principal Investigator at the University of New Mexico's Center on Alcoholism, Substance Abuse, and Addictions (CASAA), is lead author of both papers.

At the NRI, May is conducting a comprehensive study of South African mothers and their children who are affected by FASD. The work is funded through a $5.3 million grant from the National Institutes of Health's National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. The study, titled "Approaching the Prevalence of the Full Spectrum of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders in a South African Population-Based Study," appeared in the May issue of *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research*.

"This is the first population-based study of the prevalence of FASD to diagnose a significant number of alcohol-related disabilities, which are at the mild end of the continuum," Dr. May said of the study. Employing newly refined diagnostic criteria, the researchers were able to better indicate the scope of the problem. "There is evidence of advances in

diagnosis of the milder effects of alcohol exposure in the prenatal period," Dr. May said. "The rate of FASD is greater than we ever thought in human populations."

In "Maternal Factors Predicting Cognitive and Behavioral Characteristics of Children with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders," which appeared in the *Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics* in June, May and his colleagues found evidence that good health and nutrition of the pregnant mother provides her child with an advantage for cognitive and behavioral development by age seven. "In the first seven years of life environmental advantages of cognitive and behavioral stimulation and adequate nutrition can, in many cases, serve to minimize any negative consequences of prenatal alcohol exposure on the children's social, behavioral, and intellectual functioning," May said.

The NIAAA grant is funding a study for children as young as 12 months to improve their development with nutritional supplements and a regimen of cognitive and behavioral interventions.

"There is hope that a good postnatal environment in the early years of life can mitigate some, if not most, of the damage that occurs from alcohol exposure in the prenatal period," May said.

Provided by University of New Mexico

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