

**MAURITIUS FOURTH NATIONAL ASSEMBLY**  
**FIRST SESSION**  
UNREVISED Debate No 7 of 2009  
**Sitting of Tuesday 12 May 2009**  
**The Assembly met in the Assembly House, Port Louis,**  
**at 11.30 a.m**

The National Anthem was played  
*(Mr Speaker in the Chair)*

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**FOETAL ALCOHOL SYNDROME**

**(No. B/445) Mr S. Dayal (Second Member for Quartier Militaire & Moka)** asked the Minister of Health & Quality of Life whether he is aware of cases where children have been diagnosed with foetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) and, if so, will he state –

(a) the number thereof, and

(b) the steps that have been taken by Government to sensitize pregnant women on the ill effects of the consumption of alcoholic drinks during pregnancy, indicating the mechanism that has been put in place to achieve same.

**Dr. Jeetah:** Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I take it that the hon. Member is referring to Foetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) which concerns growth, mental and physical problems that may occur in a baby when a mother drinks alcohol during pregnancy.

I am informed that, from 2005 to date, only two cases of foetal alcohol syndrome have been reported in our hospitals. This may not necessarily reflect the real situation, as I understand that the parents may not volunteer all information and, therefore, it may be difficult to make the diagnosis.

Accordingly, my Ministry is taking necessary steps to review the present system for identifying and registering cases of foetal alcohol syndrome, with a view to ensuring that all newborns with any characteristics of foetal alcohol syndrome are recognised and appropriate remedial measures are taken in time. In this connection, health education campaigns will be reinforced to encourage pregnant women to give all necessary information, so that they can be provided with optimal care.

As regards part (b) of the Question, the House may be aware that the Public Health (Prohibition on Advertisement, Sponsorship and Restrictions on Sale and Consumption in Public Places of Alcoholic Drinks) Regulations 2008 have been promulgated as from 01 March 2009, to address, amongst others, problems related to alcohol consumption. In this context, my Ministry is carrying out a series of activities to sensitise pregnant women on the ill-effects of the consumption of alcoholic drinks during pregnancy. These include –

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(i) sensitisation of pregnant women attending antenatal clinics in the public health institutions through one to one counselling as well as mass counselling;

(ii) awareness campaigns and talks by health professionals in the community, namely in social welfare, community and women centres in collaboration with the Ministry of Women's Rights, Child Development & Family Welfare;

(iii) distribution of pamphlets and brochures during antenatal clinics and sensitisation programmes;

(iv) postnatal home visits by community midwives for follow-up, growth monitoring and medical check-up, and

(v) regular sensitisation campaigns on both antenatal and postnatal care through the media.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, the abovementioned measures are implemented through the network of Area Health Centres and Community Health Centres, with the participation of Community Health Care Officers, Community Midwives, Community Health Nurses and Community Physicians amongst others. The programme is run under the supervision of the Regional Public Health Superintendent of each Health Region.

**Mr Dayal:** Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, being given the gravity of the disease in that, first, it causes brain damage to children; second, a range of physical, behavioural and cognitive disabilities resulting in learning difficulties and poor co-ordination and hyper activity, will the hon. Minister consider to forcefully advise pregnant women to totally abstain from consuming alcohol, especially during pregnancy?

**Dr. Jeetah:** I have explained, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir. This country is governed by the rule of law, and there is only so much that we can do. We have got a programme of sensitisation, we have passed on new regulations and, as I mentioned to the hon. Member, every action that can be taken to make sure that people get the information that alcohol is dangerous during pregnancy will be done, and we also have to make people aware of all the difficulties their would-be child could be suffering.

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**Mr Bérenger:** Can I ask the hon. Minister when hospital services make a diagnosis that a child suffers from this disorder as a result of a pregnant woman having consumed alcohol, is the diagnosis simply 'yes or no the disorder exist', or does the diagnosis evaluate the level of disorder, that is, the amount of alcohol that must have been consumed for that disorder to be present at a certain level in the young child ?

**Dr. Jeetah:** I would like to thank the hon. Leader of the Opposition. Allow me, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, to give characteristics of this syndrome. I have got a list, and I would like to mention it, so that everybody gets to know. Babies are born small for date. Babies have congenital heart disease, pre-term deliveries. Also babies are born with low birth rate. They also suffer from mental retardation, birth defects, abnormal facial features, growth problems, problems with the central nervous system, trouble remembering and/or learning, vision or hearing problems as well as behavioural problems. I am also given to understand, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, that this syndrome can last for a long time, and there is no cure. I cannot, at this stage, give an answer to the hon. Leader of the Opposition as to how much alcohol was consumed or not, but there is a range of characteristics that is used to diagnose the case.

**Mr Bérenger:** I heard the Minister say that this is a country that has rule of law. Fair enough! But, we make the law, we change the law. In a case like that, I heard the hon. Minister say - and I think we all agree with him - that this is a very dangerous matter. These

not-yet born kids are hurt because of alcohol consumption by the mother. Can I ask the hon. Minister, what does the law say ? Is there any offence that can be committed or should there be any offence that can be committed by a pregnant woman consuming or over consuming alcohol ?

**Dr. Jeetah:** That again is a very valid point. I would like to mention to the House that I need to seek advice from the State Law Office on this issue.

**Mr Lauthan:** Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, on the question of asking pregnant women who are already dependent on alcohol to stop drinking, it is more easily said than done. One taboo that all the Ministries and NGOs will have to face is that alcoholism has been for too long limited to categories of workers. I won't mention the categories of people, but it is now everywhere. Younger and younger people are getting drunk, and more women and young girls. So, we need to target even the teenagers. We cannot wait for them to get pregnant and then to target them. We need to be proactive, and target the youngsters more than anything else.

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**Dr. Jeetah:** Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, here again, allow me to give some information. In this country, with a population of 1.2 million, we consume 6,000,000 litres of rum, 17,000,000 litres of whisky and 36,000,000 litres of beer. Over and above this, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, about 35% of patients who come to our hospitals are there because of alcohol...

*(Interruptions)*

**The Deputy Speaker:** Order, please!

**Dr. Jeetah:** ... and nearly 50% of our patients are in Brown Sequad Hospital because of alcohol. That is the very reason why we have passed on these regulations, whereby one cannot sell to children as well as one cannot drink in public. We are well aware of the difficulties that can arise in a community because of alcohol abuse. As I said, I am not totally satisfied with the way this issue is being handled in so far as pregnant women are concerned, and we are reviewing the system.

**Mr Dayal:** Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, can I ask the hon. Minister whether he is satisfied with the mechanism he has put in place, and if it is delivering the expected results ? Cigarette kills also !

**Dr. Jeetah:** This is a medium to long-term process, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir. We will have to be able to educate our people of the difficulties that one could face with alcohol abuse.

At least, we have had the courage to pass on these regulations.