

**John Dalli**

Member of the European Commission, responsible for Health and Consumer Policy

**Commissioner Dalli delivers speech at the European Parliament on the occasion of International Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD) Day**

*Check Against Delivery  
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi  
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

John DALLI, European Commissioner for Health and Consumer Policy, attends a lunch seminar organised by the European Alcohol Policy Alliance (Eurocare) and the Polish State Agency for Prevention of Alcohol-Related Problems (PARPA) under the patronage of the European Parliament

**Brussels, Belgium, 07 September 2011**

**PROTECTING THE UNBORN CHILD FROM ALCOHOL**  
**EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT BRUSSELS**

**WEDNESDAY 7 SEPTEMBER 2011, 14:00HRS**

**SPEECH**

Honourable Members of Parliament,  
Mr Undersecretary of State  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased to be here with you today to speak about an issue of key significance to the health of our future generations: protecting the unborn child from alcohol.

As I arrive at the end of this conference, I very much look forward to listening to your conclusions from this morning's discussion.

Children – and in particular the unborn child – have no means to protect themselves against the harmful effects of alcohol.

The damage that alcohol may inflict can stay with them throughout their lives.

This is the reason why the first priority of the EU alcohol strategy is to protect children, young people and the unborn child.

Within this strategy, the European Commission fostered the creation of the European Alcohol and Health Forum to mobilise action across society to reduce alcohol-related harm; action that supports and enhances Member States' efforts in this regard.

I am glad to say that a wide range of actions to protect young people from alcohol have been initiated in the context of the EU alcohol strategy.

I am also pleased to see that the stakeholders who have joined the Forum – both the industry and non-governmental organisations alike – are carrying out valuable initiatives; for example to prevent under-age drinking, by raising awareness or offering young people healthier alternatives.

There is progress.

That said, it is clear that much more can be done.

And one area where I believe more can be done is indeed protecting children from being exposed to the effects of alcohol misuse, at home, within the family.

Another such area is the protection of the unborn child. Despite all the worthy initiatives started, and all the good practices implemented, we still have a long way to go.

There are many studies being carried out on the adverse effects of alcohol.

We all know that alcohol intake during pregnancy can cause, for example, facial anomalies, slow growth, and dysfunction of the nervous system in the unborn child. We call these and other serious consequences "Foetal Alcohol Syndrome".

I was surprised to learn that, however, we do not have accurate information on the incidence or prevalence of Foetal Alcohol Syndrome across the EU Member States.

Lack of accurate information is, however, no excuse for lack of action. Preventing damage to one life is worthy of the effort.

Foetal Alcohol Syndrome is just one example.

It is estimated that alcohol contributes to sixty thousand underweight births each year in the European Union.

Underweight, which is, in itself, a risk factor for adverse conditions later in life.

To protect children from the effects of alcohol, we need to work together – policy makers at EU and national levels, civil society and industry. We all have a role to play.

Member States in particular have a key role to play in this regard:

- In providing services to expectant mothers to promote healthy pregnancies; and inform them about the dangers of alcohol for their babies.
- In supporting the health and wellbeing of families with small children; and
- In providing treatment opportunities for alcohol use disorders.

The role of the European Commission is to support and encourage Member States' action towards this end.

As foreseen in the alcohol strategy, the European Commission co-ordinates efforts at EU level; facilitates exchange of information and good practice; and, more importantly, mobilises action across society.

And one issue where the Commission has encouraged more action is on placing warnings about the risks of alcohol during pregnancy on alcoholic drinks labels.

I am pleased that some – modest - progress has been achieved.

As you know, France was the first Member State to introduce a law to ensure that all alcoholic beverages carry a warning against drinking during pregnancy.

The United Kingdom also took action in this area. It convinced alcohol producers that it would be a good idea to put the Chief Medical Officer's advice on their labels; the advice being not to drink "if pregnant or trying to conceive".

Alcohol producers can indeed play an effective role in this regard. Some have already taken the initiative to use the French warning pictogram on their products, on a voluntary basis.

These are some examples of good practice implemented in only a couple of Member States.

What I would like to see is such practices being implemented right across the European Union, and across all beverage types and categories.

European citizens want to see more action on the health effects of alcohol. There is a consistently high level of citizens' support for health warnings on alcoholic drinks.

A survey carried out by the European Commission carried in 2009 showed strong support for warnings about drinking during pregnancy on alcohol advertisements.

I believe we have not yet made use of all the opportunities to act. There is more that can be done: by alcohol producers and distributors, by the public health community, by Member States; and perhaps even by the European Commission.

We should be asking:

- Are our healthcare systems offering adequate support for future parents and young families?
- Is the medical profession contributing as much as possible to the education of mothers-to-be and more generally on this issue?
- Is there sufficient support for children and young people, including those who have been adversely affected by alcohol?
- Are we doing enough to address alcohol-related risks and to provide early assistance?

We know that exposure to alcohol during pregnancy, as well as exposure to drinking problems during childhood, is likely to increase the risk of problematic alcohol use later in life. So this may be the start of a vicious circle.

We should also look upstream and ask:

- Why are young adults the heaviest drinkers in our populations?
- And why is there a trend towards increased alcohol consumption and "binge drinking" among young girls and women?

And more importantly, is there something that could be done to address this situation?

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

We need to make concerted efforts to answer these questions – and I can assure you that the Commission can and will continue to stimulate, support and co-ordinate actions related to problematic alcohol consumption.

This is clearly an area which calls for co-ordinated action from all quarters to achieve tangible and sustainable results.

I very much hope we can achieve this by working together –in particular to avoid the suffering of children and the unborn child.

Thank you.