

Tragedy of babies born riddled with damage of drink

ALARMING numbers of pregnant women are putting their unborn babies at serious risk of being born with alcohol poisoning.

Shock statistics have just uncovered an almost 50 per cent rise in Foetal Alcohol Syndrome in the past two years, with more than 300 children significantly affected last year.

A report by the Centre for Social Justice think-tank found 313 babies damaged by being exposed to alcohol in the womb last year, almost triple the number 10 years earlier.

It is estimated one in 100 babies are now born with FAS disorders which can include facial abnormalities, learning disabilities and growth problems.

However, experts warn that record alcohol consumption and binge-drinking mean these figures are just "the tip of the iceberg".

Psychiatrist Dr Raja Mukherjee, a world specialist in foetal alcohol damage, estimates three per cent of the population is affected. He said: "If there are official reports of 300 FAS cases, then, in reality, there are

By **Lucy Johnston**

HEALTH EDITOR

maybe 3,000 cases on the wider spectrum. These latest figures just show the tip of the iceberg. So many people with foetal alcohol disorders slip under the radar."

Dr Mukherjee, lead clinician at the UK's only foetal alcohol disorder

'To be blotto from 16 to 21 is now a rite of passage'

clinic run by the Surrey and Borders NHS Trust, added: "It is under-reported and under-diagnosed, with many sufferers growing up unaware of their condition."

Julia Brown, who runs the Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder Trust, said: "The cost of alcohol has not gone up relative to income, so it's cheap. It's more socially acceptable.

It's now become almost a rite of passage that you're not meant to remember the years of 16 to 21, you're meant to be blotto. In some schools about 10 per cent of children are affected. As a nation, we're sitting on a ticking timebomb."

Lynda Hill, 51, from Halifax, West Yorkshire, who is legal guardian of her alcohol-damaged two-year-old grandson, said: "Jacob is gorgeous but is hyper-active, hates loud noises, has no attention span and can be very short-tempered. I want women to know the consequences of drinking when pregnant."

A case due to be heard by the Court of Appeal may decide if women who expose unborn babies to alcohol can be prosecuted.

A council in north-west England claims a six-year-old girl who suffered brain damage in the womb was "poisoned" by her mother who carried on drinking while pregnant despite being warned of the risks.

● *More information at fasd-trust.co.uk, 01608 811 599 and 0208 458 5951nofas-uk.org*



WARNING: Lynda Hill, with grandson Jacob: 'I want women to know the risks'