

## FASD – De Aar mums get beyond the ‘tipping point’



Chairman of the Foundation for Alcohol-Related Research (FARR), Professor Denis Viljoen, and its CEO, Ms Leana Olivier.

Picture: Chris Bateman

**When most of the low-income folk in the ‘ghost train’ town of De Aar began remonstrating with any pregnant mother who was boozing, excited campaigners thought they’d broken through the ‘tipping point’.**

However, their research colleagues proved they’d gone even further – the dedicated local platoon of social workers, nurses, therapists and volunteers had in three short years reduced the prevalence of fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) by 30%. This is in a town with the worst recorded FASD prevalence of any single community in the world, where 120 out of every 1 000 residents suffer from FASD (12%).

**Joblessness has now reached 80% and alcohol abuse is rife.**

From the mid-1990s, when the South African Railways moved its repair and manufacturing yards from De Aar (the country’s most central town) to the major capitals, the community’s social fabric slowly crumpled. Joblessness has now reached 80% and alcohol abuse is rife. According to available data, the only other sites (also South African) that come anywhere close to the town’s FASD prevalence are: Wellington (88 per 1 000), Witzenberg (73), Upington

(69) and Johannesburg (27), with the next worse prevalence recorded in certain sectors of the American Indian population (8) and in Sweden (1.33). This remarkable local achievement, recognised in a slew of appreciative awards by the Northern Cape government,<sup>1</sup> is testimony to a holistic, multi-pronged intervention by the Cape Town-based Foundation for Alcohol-Related Research (FARR).

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### Sustained grassroots campaigning

Chairman of FARR, Professor Denis Viljoen, and the CEO, Ms Leana Olivier, believe the years of intense grassroots campaigning about the dangers of alcohol abuse conducted in the former railway hub of South Africa will soon bear even greater fruit.

The demographics of the area have the majority of the population living on the ‘wrong side of the tracks’ in the coloured

township. However, for FARR this actually means the ‘right side’ of the tracks because that’s where they’ve erected their multi-purpose community centre, loved and known by all as Die Pienk Huis.

‘With all the provincial clinics and Department of Social Development staff on board in our Healthy Mother, Healthy Baby programme we now have 90% of the women of child-bearing age in the community enrolled,’ said Olivier. She believes a major reason their comprehensive programme will drop FASD prevalence even further is that their multi-disciplinary platoon has access to all local antenatal clinics and the district hospital and is expanding its activities monthly. Underpinning all this, FARR has trained local people who have been working in the community at risk for nearly a decade. ‘They’re known and trusted and that’s probably the greatest single factor that’s swung things around for us,’ adds Olivier, a former maternal, child and woman’s health manager for the Western Cape.

De Aar has a population of 30 000. At last count there were more than 100 shebeens in the local townships. Take away the better-off minority ‘white’ community and you’re left with fewer than 300 people keeping a single shebeen in business. That’s a lot of drinking. So it didn’t take much arithmetic – or ‘ghost busting’ – to single out De Aar as the site most worthy of research and intervention as FARR’s inception and growth in the Western Cape tracked in inverse proportion to the town’s decline.

### Data alarmed retired medical geneticist

Viljoen, a retired medical geneticist and former deputy head of the discipline at the University of Cape Town and later head at the University of the Witwatersrand, said the crying need for a body such as FARR, at



Proud De Aar mothers at Die Pienk Huis community centre.

