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October 2, 2013

RE: Response to the Article "What to really expect: An economist examines the evidence and finds a lot of pregnancy advice is just plain wrong"

Dear Editor:

The Ontario Public Health Association (OPHA) is a member-based not-for-profit association that has been advancing the public health agenda within Ontario since 1949 and, through its membership represents approximately 10,000 health professionals. OPHA's subject matter experts in the area of reproductive health have concerns over the recent article entitled: "*What to really expect: An economist examines the evidence and finds a lot of pregnancy advice is just plain wrong*". The purpose of the OPHA Reproductive Health Workgroup is to strengthen and enhance reproductive health services and supports to better meet the physical, emotional, and psychosocial needs of women of childbearing age and their families across Ontario.

This article oversimplifies and minimizes the risks and impact of various health behaviours during pregnancy. Regarding alcohol consumption, there is no safe amount of alcohol during pregnancy and no safe time to drink alcohol during pregnancy. These recommendations are supported by current evidence and practice guidelines in Canada, including those from the Public Health Agency of Canada and the Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada. No one can predict which infants born to mothers who drink will be affected, nor can anyone predict how severe these effects will be— it is therefore important to use a precautionary approach. If a woman does not drink alcohol while she is pregnant, her child will not have Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), a term that describes a range of disabilities (physical, social, mental/emotional) that may affect people whose mothers drank alcohol while they are pregnant. There are more than 3,000 babies born each year in Canada with FASD, and approximately 300,000 Canadians are currently living with this lifelong disability. Ongoing education and awareness is required to prevent FASD.

This article also discussed other health behaviours during pregnancy, such as the exercise, weight gain, and the consumption of caffeine, raw fish, and deli meats. Conducting research on the effects of exposure on pregnant women and their offspring is methodically challenging and ethically problematic. In situations where a potential risk exists, public health takes a precautionary approach to minimize risks to both the pregnant mother and developing baby, even when the research evidence is limited.

In closing, OPHA encourages all individuals of childbearing age to consult with evidence-based Canadian sources of information, including the Public Health Agency of Canada, public health units, and health care providers.

Sincerely,

Ontario Public Health Association