A fall-out of alcoholism on Indian reservations is the prevalence of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, or FAS, which can cause physical and mental retardation in babies.

Keywords

Pine Ridge Reservation, Native Americans, Indians, Sioux, Alcoholism, Babies, South Dakota, Welfare, Poverty, Drinking, Pregnancy, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, FAS, Mental Retardation, Michael Doris, The Broken Cord, Health, Wellness, Depression, Foster Care, Brain Damage, Abuse, Dr. Jon Jantz

Transcript

Tragedy at Pine Ridge: Fetal Alcohol Syndrome

TOM BROKAW, anchor:

Tonight, part two of our series on the Tragedy at Pine Ridge, the large Sioux reservation in southwestern
South Dakota. On this program in the past we have reported on how hunger is doing so much damage to the next generation in Ethiopia, how war has warped the environment of the young in Beirut. Tonight, NBC's Betty Rollin, with the tragic story of alcohol and the babies of Pine Ridge.

BETTY ROLLIN reporting:
Pine Ridge, South Dakota. Beautiful from a distance, but only from a distance. Most of the 20,000 Sioux Indians who live here live on welfare and in poverty and despair, the kind of conditions that make men drink, and these days, make women drink too, even when they're pregnant.

Did you drink when you were pregnant?

KARLA: Yeah, I did.

ROLLIN: Did you know you were going to hurt your baby?

KARLA: Not really, but yeah. But I just kept drinking.

ROLLIN: Karla's baby has FAS, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, a condition that leads to both physical and mental retardation, and because of its rapid increase on this and other reservations, threatens to disable the entire American Indian nation.

MICHAEL DORIS: It is a crisis. In some communities almost a quarter of the kids born are impaired to some degree.


DORIS: He's 21 years old. He can't easily make change for a dollar. He can't tell time. He has seizures, five or six a month. When you project this to whole populations of people, they are left vulnerable to exploitation. They are dependent on the outside world for medical treatment, for financial support. And they cannot fulfill a destiny because they cannot project a future.

ROLLIN: Venus Redstar is 27 and has five children. Two of her boys show signs of Fetal Alcohol Affect, a less-severe condition from the same cause, drinking.

So, why did you do it?

VENUS RED STAR: Because I was depressed.

ROLLIN: Why?

RED STAR: I can't answer that either.

ROLLIN: The pregnant mother who drinks and poisons her baby with alcohol is often the mother who can't care for her baby once he's born. As a result, these children are often neglected and abused, and most of them wind up in foster care.

SHERRY WHITE CAT: I remember one time when I was pregnant with Antonio, I stole a whole case of wine from a bootlegger and I drank and drank and drank.

ROLLIN: Sherry Whitecat's baby is 15 months old now, brain damaged, and has been in and out of foster care. Sherry herself was put in foster care after her alcoholic mother abused her. She lives now with her husband, their other child, and three other families in one room with no running water. She is pregnant again.

WHITE CAT: You know, one beer ain't going to hurt. But one beer leads to another one, and another one leads to a case, and a case leads to two cases. The magic of it all is leaving the sense of reality.
ROLLIN: Everyone concerned wants Sherry's reality to change. But until it does, they want her to stop drinking.

Dr. JON JANTZ (Pine Ridge Hospital): I've come to the point after dealing with a lot of this is to recommend that women who can't control their drinking during pregnancy, should have protective custody during the pregnancy, for nine months.

ROLLIN: But jailing pregnant women who drink is unlikely. Among other reasons, the drug they use, alcohol, is legal. Meanwhile, as women like Sherry continue to drink, the number of Fetal Alcohol babies grows.

WHITE CAT: One of the sad things about it is that, is he doesn't cry, hardly. He laughs, but through that laugh is a lot of hurt for him, you know. It's through all that alcohol.

ROLLIN: Sherry will soon know if her new baby is also unable to cry. Betty Rollin, NBC News, Pine Ridge, South Dakota.