Locked up with grog disorders

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OVER 60 per cent of people in Central Australian prisons are suffering from severe cognitive impairments, most likely as a result of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders.

Dr Patricia Miller from the Central Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Service (CAALAS) gave anecdotal evidence at a public hearing of the Commonwealth government’s inquiry into the harmful use of alcohol in Aboriginal communities held in Alice Springs on Monday.

She was asked how many Centralians charged with a criminal offence were suffering from FASD.

"In our discussions with the board and our legal professionals, it's looking like 60 per cent in terms of their cognitive impairment," Dr Miller said.

"One of the consequences to FASD is you will usually end up with offending and imprisonment ..."

She noted that this was a "layman's term of assessment" as there were currently no formal diagnostic tools for FASD available in Australia.

"If somebody actually went out and did the research on it, it'd probably be higher than that."

A representative from the Central Australian Aboriginal Programmes Unit (CAAPU) said there were no psychologists available in Alice Springs to diagnose their clients.

She added that even if someone were deemed to be a victim of FASD, there were no services to which that client could be referred for treatment. The standing committee's Chair Dr Sharman Stone said FASD was central to the whole inquiry.

"One of the consequences to FASD is you will usually end up with offending and imprisonment, because you have difficulty in remembering, learning, managing your anger — it's a whole range of really serious problems."

The committee also heard from several representatives of Tangletyre Council who advocated for the return of the Alcohol Restricted Monitoring System — the precursor to the Banned Drinkers Register.

They said the ARMS system prevented people from purchasing alcohol rather than confiscating it after purchase without a refund.

Dr Stone said although it was coincidental the inquiry's first public hearing was held in Alice Springs, Central Australia provided the committee with examples of which strategies had worked and which had been ineffective.

She said the committee was disappointed, however, that the Department of Health prevented them from meeting several front line staff at the Alice Springs Hospital at the last minute.

"In some ways that was disappointing as we would have liked to have spoken to the people who were at the coal face," she said.

The health department provided a statement to media saying they will contribute to the whole of government submission.

The committee held hearings in Tennant Creek on Tuesday and Darwin on Wednesday and Thursday.