

OPERATION SAVE KIDS

Landmark study aims to unveil the prevalence and effects of foetal alcohol spectrum disorder

■ **Josh Chiat**

A world-class paediatric researcher and a former WA chief psychologist are leading a landmark project in Leonora to uncover the prevalence and impact of foetal alcohol spectrum disorder in the northern Goldfields community.

It will be the first project in the Goldfields aiming to diagnose and treat people with FASD, a range of neurological conditions found in children whose mothers drank alcohol while pregnant. Starting this

week, the \$525,000 project has been supported by funds raised by five Rotary clubs, including the Rotary Club of Boulder, and is slated to run for at least two years.

Bruce Dufty, the chairman of the Rotary Aboriginal Reference Group and WA's chief psychologist from 1982-1989, travelled to Leonora yesterday to meet stakeholders ahead of the first diagnostic clinic in April.

He hopes it will help direct solutions and responses in the town.

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Bruce Dufty will head to Leonora for a health project on FASD.
Picture: Kelsey Reid

FASD prevention the aim

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“We’re aiming to get an indication of what the incidence of FASD is in the Leonora area, because if you have an idea of what the incidence levels are, the community becomes much more motivated to do something about it,” he said.

The project will be spearheaded by paediatrician James Fitzpatrick, a world-leading researcher into FASD involved in a milestone investigation into the prevalence of the condition in WA’s Fitzroy Valley region.

That research found as many as one in five children in the remote Kimberley communities had the disorder.

A second major report into incarcerated youth at the Banksia Hill detention facility in Perth, published last year, found as many as 36 per cent of offenders had the disorder.

Dr Fitzpatrick said the condition could manifest in learning difficulties, speech and language impairments and physical disabilities like cerebral palsy.

The secondary impacts of the condition are substantial, but can be managed if it is diagnosed early.

“It leads to mental health problems, including depression, anxiety and suicide, substance abuse issues and trouble with the law,” he said.

“There’ve been some large studies that have found those are some of the secondary effects of FASD if it’s not diagnosed and managed early.

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Bruce Dufty

those secondary effects two to fourfold.”

Dr Fitzpatrick’s firm Patches Paediatrics will partner in the Leonora project with a local Aboriginal therapist and Alaskan experts.

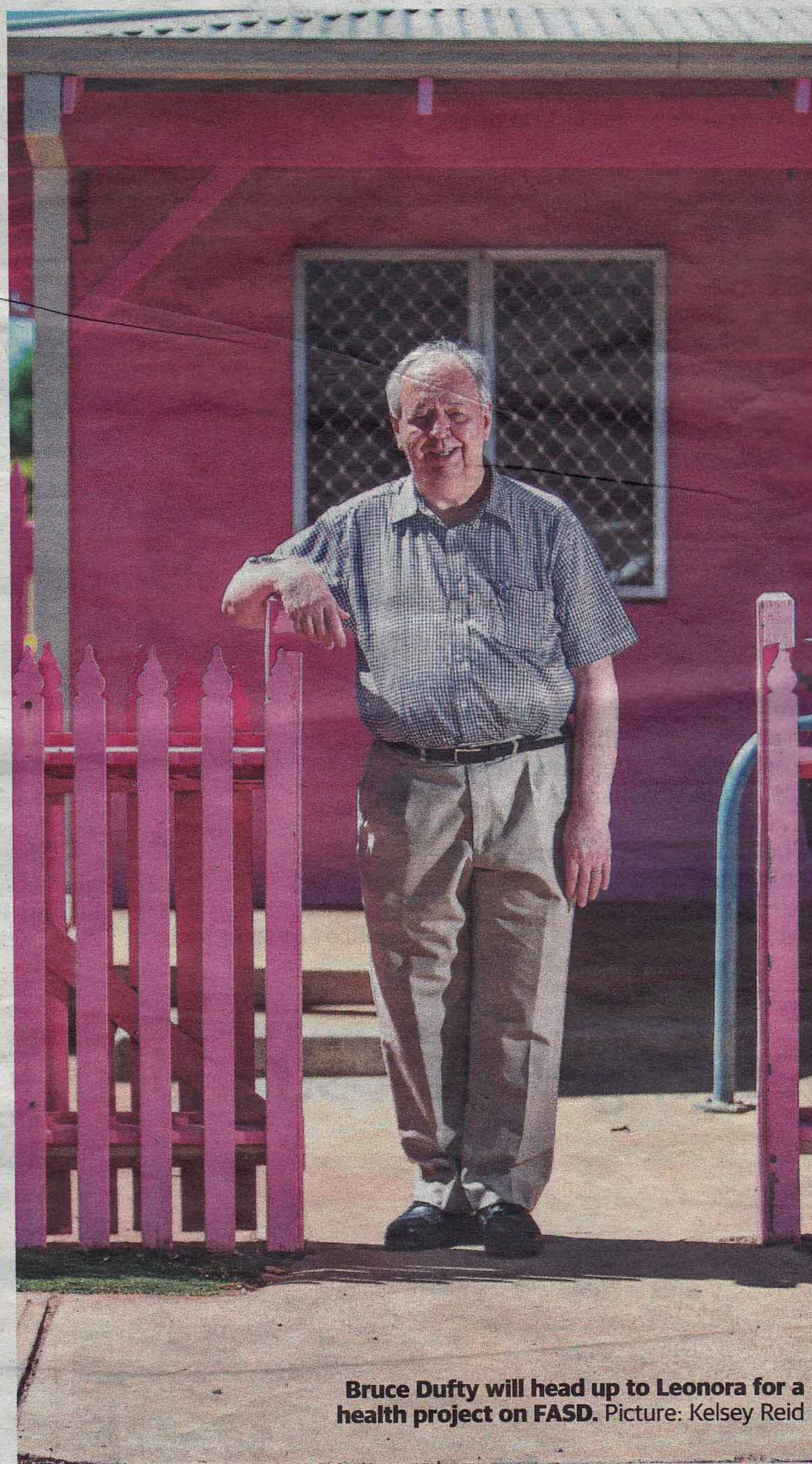
He said it would develop the community’s awareness of child development issues, and would also include diagnosing global developmental delay, intellectual disability and autism spectrum disorder.

“Importantly, the approach in Leonora is about improving child development outcomes generally ... always in the context of the early life trauma that a lot of young people in remote communities experience,” he said.

“We also know that diagnosing conditions like FASD and providing community education about FASD can raise awareness about the problems of alcohol abuse in pregnancy and it can help to change behaviours so less women drink in pregnancy.

“So diagnosing FASD and educating the community about it is a very potent driver of prevention in alcohol abuse and pregnancy.”

Mr Dufty said Leonora had been chosen as the location for the project because community support to roll it out had been strong.



Bruce Dufty will head up to Leonora for a health project on FASD. Picture: Kelsey Reid