INSTITUTIONS RANGING from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to the American Academy of Pediatrics warn that no amount of alcohol consumption during pregnancy is safe. Yet an annual national survey sponsored by America’s Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) regularly reports that some women drink while they’re pregnant. In 2013, between 4.4 percent and 19 percent of the pregnant women interviewed for the survey—with the rate varying based on the pregnancy trimester—said they consumed alcohol.

“The statistics are out that women who are pregnant are drinking during pregnancy,” says Leigh Tenkku Lepper, associate research professor and research director for the MU School of Social Work in the College of Human Environmental Sciences. “Bottom line is we’ve got misconceptions—misperceptions—on the effect of alcohol use during pregnancy.”

Tenkku Lepper received a $1.1 million grant from the CDC last October to try to change those perceptions in hopes of preventing what are known as fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASDs). The term covers a wide array of conditions, including symptoms such as growth problems and learning disabilities, that can occur in people whose mothers consumed alcohol while pregnant. With the four-year CDC grant, Tenkku Lepper has been turning the Midwest Regional Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Training Center that she has long led into a national organization. MU’s reconfigured FASD training center, now called the Mental and Reproductive Health Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder Practice Implementation Center (MRPIC), is one of six regional centers modified to provide a national approach and coverage.

MRPIC’s focus is on obstetrician-gynecologists and social workers. Joining forces with other national organizations, the center is working to develop clear messages and discipline-specific training materials aimed at persuading these reproductive and mental health professionals to regularly counsel their patients against any alcohol consumption during pregnancy. Tenkku Lepper considers ob-gyns a particularly tough audience for the center’s message, prone to sharing a commonly voiced opinion that occasional light drinking will not harm a fetus.

Pointing out that the only cause of FASDs is alcohol consumption during pregnancy, Tenkku Lepper says: “So something isn’t clear to them.”

The exact number of people with FASDs is unknown, according to the CDC. Older estimates calculate that about 40,000 babies are born each year with FASD, but more recent studies suggest that number is considerably higher, says Jon Dunbar-Cooper, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) public health analyst, in an e-mail.

The CDC’s new national focus targets other medical professions, as well. Other practice implementation centers are developing discipline-specific plans for nurses, pediatricians, medical assistants and family medicine practitioners or internists, according to a CDC communication.