

Written evidence from Wellbeing of Women [MEW0066]

Wellbeing of Women is the women's health charity saving and changing the lives of women, girls, and babies.

Led by women's voices, we improve health and wellbeing through research, education, and advocacy.

We believe that with the right information, women are the best advocates for themselves. They have the power to influence the health behaviour of all those around them. Therefore, if we get it right for women, everyone benefits.

Wellbeing of Women has been funding high-quality, peer-reviewed medical research since 1964 into the whole spectrum of women's reproductive and gynaecological health to improve diagnoses and treatments, and find preventions and cures.

Our Objectives:

- To raise awareness of women's health and wellbeing through tackling taboos and reducing stigma around women's reproductive and gynaecological health. We do this by championing education on women's health for all and connecting people to evidence-based, digestible information.
- To enable research excellence, encourage research across multiple disciplines, and prioritise research based on impact and need.
- To advocate for improvements to women's health and wellbeing by influencing women's healthcare policy, guidelines and practice, by supporting changes in policy across the wider society and by encouraging women to advocate for themselves.

1. What is the nature and the extent of discrimination faced by women experiencing the menopause?

Menopause has been called "the last taboo" even though it is a natural transition that most women will go through at some point. Some women have few symptoms whilst others have debilitating symptoms which can stop them taking part in their normal daily life.

Women feel unable to talk about common gynaecological issues like the menopause at home or work for fear of being stigmatised. Many studies have shown that women suffer significant and unnecessary distress caused by the stigmas around the menopause. Research has also shown that silence, shame, discrimination and stigma relating to ageing and the menopause are highly prevalent and can have a huge impact on a woman's quality of life.

Over 70% of women experience symptoms during the perimenopause and menopause that can impact their quality of life and up to 30% experience severe symptoms, particularly at work. In fact, a survey conducted by Wellbeing of Women in conjunction with ITV's Tonight programme found that 1 in 4 women consider leaving the workplace due to menopausal symptoms.

A survey from the British Menopause Society found that 45% of women felt that menopausal symptoms had a negative impact on their work and over 33% of women felt less self-confident in social situations.

Women over the age of 50 are the fastest growing demographic in the workplace. Yet 900,000 women are estimated to have quit their jobs due to the menopause and 1 in 4 women have considered leaving work because of their symptoms.

Women are not talking about menopause in the workplace and companies do not have the understanding and education to support them.

In the UK, there are over 4.3 million working women aged between 50-64 suggesting a significant proportion of the workforce will be going through the menopause whilst in employment. However, until relatively recently, the menopause had been overlooked as an occupational health issue and no evidence-based work-based interventions existed to help this population.

Absenteeism: Borenstein and colleagues found a 13.7% absenteeism rate (days taken as absence) for women with premenstrual symptoms and a 15% reduction in work productivity (N = 364).

Lack of Information

As part of our education, advocacy and awareness raising, we run women's health and wellbeing webinars. Our network is made up of a variety of organisations in the UK and the audience is predominantly women at work. Our webinars provide information on specific topics for women and their families to better equip them to advocate for their healthcare needs.

Sarah Jane Cale, founder of Positive Menopause, a website offering information and advice for a community of 500 women recently spoke at our webinar entitled "Tackling taboos including the menopause." Sarah Jane said:

"There are approximately 13 million women in the UK in the workplace over 40. It's the fastest growing demographic, and we have a lot to still give the workplace through our own experience... [but] one in four women have actually thought about leaving their jobs [due to symptoms]."

This webinar has already received over 30,000 hits. It also generated a significant amount of media interest particularly around lack of knowledge and information around the menopause.

On 10 June, we held our second Tackling Taboos Webinar attended by more than 500 women and some men. The insightful discussion was hosted by Wellbeing of Women Chair Prof Dame Lesley Regan, and involved Dame Jessica Ennis-Hill DBE, Olympic medallist, mother and founder of women's training app, Jennis, Izzy Judd, author of Dare to Dream and host of Let's Talk Fertility podcast, and Marissa Thomas, UK Board member of PwC and champion of women's health.

Key comments from panellists include:

Dame Jessica Ennis-Hill: *"It was only once I got older it blew my mind we didn't have those conversations on a regular basis."*

Izzy Judd: *"It's very difficult to get the information..."*

Professor Dame Lesley Regan: *"It's imperative that we find ways to offer women evidenced-based information so that they are back in the driving seat."*

Attendees were also encouraged to comment, we have listed a two or three below. There were many comments with women stating they had been misdiagnosed, waited years, been dismissed, ridiculed when it came to seeking help for their menopause symptoms; much was said about education and lack of knowledge:

“Menopause is very difficult. It hadn't occurred to me that my hormones would effect [sic] my ligaments etc. Is there any information on what we should do at this stage in our lives and how we should exercise safely and stay strong without damaging our bodies?”

“Self-research seems to be an increasingly common story amongst women. We know our bodies but unfortunately there seems to be a limited level of support from our GP services. A lack of understanding and/or interest in itself has a massive impact on our wellbeing with issues often being dismissed. We need to get more clarity on the difference between what is normal and what is common. Unfortunately, a lot of women's health issues seem to be common and misinterpreted as normal.”

Perimenopause Webinar

“Really informative session with some great pragmatic advice thank you.”

Notes from menopause focus groups run by Wellbeing of Women:

“Biggest issue is the menopause. I never had access to information, it's getting better a bit more recently. Local GPs are not educated enough, in particular male GPs. GPs having to refer women on as they don't know about the menopause. In the workplace, PWC have set up an internal group (nearly 300 members) as a safe place to share experience.”

“Lockdown, living on my own and menopause don't mix.”

“Started menopause in the 30s so had very few resources. Suffered for a few years, then went to private menopause clinic. Finally got advice on what was the right mix of HRT. GPs didn't have the empathy as hadn't been through it. Struggled to find advice on early menopause.”

“Facing concerns about the menopause, but not what sure is coming.”

“Early-perimenopausal, alongside massive depression and mental health issues. Until I was 42/43 I'd never experienced any anxiety. [Had] 42 years of anxiety within 9 months. Really struggled to tell the doctors. Menopause all of a sudden in the last 18 months there's so much more information available. Knock-on effect on my family – balancing caring for my parents, with trying to get myself healthier. I'm quite resilient, didn't have great support. Saying the right words at work, but not really being educated to support me?”

“I've put on a ton of weight, and the only advice I get from doctor is 'don't eat so much cake' which isn't what is going on.”

Barriers?

“Puberty to fertility issues to menopause have all been handled SO separately. Would love to see women's health treated as a lifecycle. E.g. if someone had of explained the impact that endometriosis would have on my periods through to my fertility through to early menopause.”

“Dodgy smear result. Had to have a unpleasant procedure. “This is because you've never had children” statement from the doctor 10 years. That experience has stuck with me. So I'm now reluctant to go to the doctors. Cysts on ovaries – and doctor said that in for something else. I know I should probably go on HRT but I just don't want to go the doctors.”

“More accessibility – there are more private menopause clinics, but the cost and price is 200/300 pounds to see a private consultant.”

“Always been about ‘deal with the moment’ rather than preventative / future looking.”

“Giving more information to help women manage future expectations of their bodies and health.”

What could help?

“Get passed around so much – would be good to have a more integrated healthcare / support from one individual.”

“GPs need to have some refreshed mandatory training around these issues.”

“More outspoken female leaders contributing voice to the topic.”

“The more I educate myself, the more I feel the ability to educate myself. More needed to educate men as well.”

“I wasn’t offered testosterone publicly, only privately, but it was the game changer. Should be done on the NHS and done properly.”

What resources are good?

“Facebook menopause group is fantastic. Headed up by a lady who is campaigning government who is brilliant.”

“Found so many amazing support groups on facebook. Like diverticulitis.”

“Counselling offered via PWC (employer) was good.”

“Research is important, but personally I’d want help now as well. From our research, there are the symptoms of x,y,z, therefore go here for help.”

“An umbrella organisation like you, might be able to provide support groups. E.g. what NCT does – something similar for infertility, or for menopause. NCT was my LIFELINE.”

“Amazing idea NCT for Menopause.”

“Would be good to know – if I go onto Wellbeing of Women, get directly pushed out to all the top resources, rather than clicking through google.”

2. How can businesses factor in the needs of employees going through the menopause?

Supporting women and employees affected by the menopause can help attract and improve retention of staff, ensure a diverse and inclusive workforce, increase productivity, maximise employee wellbeing and address the gender pay gap.

It is imperative that all organisations recognise that the menopause can be an issue in the workplace and women may need support. Organisations should create an open, inclusive and supportive culture for all staff. All staff should be encouraged and supported to talk openly, positively and respectfully about the menopause and organisations should commit to actively support and inform employees affected by the menopause

A few small practical adjustments or initiatives at work could make a world of difference to someone experiencing some of the symptoms of the menopause.

In 2015, the WoW funded Menopause@Work Project began developing and testing two evidence-based brief individual-level workplace interventions. The study featured 60 managers/occupational

health or health and safety representatives (OHHSRs) and 150 women from 3 companies. Through a series of interviews, questionnaires, & feedback sessions certain themes were highlighted.

Women going through the menopause expressed concerns that their wellbeing and work performance may be being affected by their symptoms, yet do not feel they can disclose their menopausal status and related difficulties. This is particularly the case if they have a male and/or a younger line manager or are concerned that they may not receive a positive response or might be stigmatised for being menopausal. Women's confidence can be negatively affected during menopause. Employers need to be more aware of the menopause as a potential occupational health issue, and offer suitable information, resources, and practices to support women going through the menopause.

3. How can practices addressing workplace discrimination relating to menopause be implemented? For example, through guidance, advice, adjustments, or enforcement.

Wellbeing of Women is currently investing into a research project that aims to improve the workplace for women and employees going through the menopause.

Studies have shown women would like more information and support to help them manage their menopause at work and for there to be better awareness, particularly among line managers. They have also shown that women would like workplaces to have menopause-friendly policies in place such as flexible working and better control over the temperature and ventilation of their work environment.

In her research project, Wellbeing of Women researcher Dr Claire Hardy, a Chartered Occupational Psychologist and Academic Lecturer at Lancaster University, will build on her previous research to develop an online toolkit for organisations.

The online toolkit will provide information, training and resources to help increase awareness, attitudes and confidence around menopause at work. It will hopefully not only improve organisations' culture around menopause and women's health issues, but also improve working women's experience of menopause.

In the first Menopause@Work project Professor Myra Hunter and Dr Claire Hardy developed a self-help guide booklet for women with problematic menopausal symptoms to use cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), which has been found to be effective in several clinical trials. The project also developed a 30-minute online training programme for line managers to help increase their knowledge and awareness of the menopause, as well as increase their confidence to talk about the menopause with staff.

The study also found that the main factors associated with menopause-related absence were most often work-related, including the work environment (being able to negotiate work, dissatisfaction with toilet cleanliness, working in a shared office, and insufficient rest areas), the line manager (disclosing menopause symptoms to manager, being male, and/or younger in relation to female employee), and work perception (higher perceived work performance impairment, job dissatisfaction).

Wellbeing of Women campaign: 'Menopause Workplace Pledge'

In October 2021, Wellbeing of Women will be launching its first campaign called the 'Menopause Workplace Pledge'. Our aim is that women and employees going through the menopause are fully

supported in the workplace. By raising awareness of the impact of the menopause on women, and how employers can better support employees going through this transition, we hope women will not be limited by their gynaecological health and can achieve their full potential in the workplace.

Background

Nearly a million women have quit their jobs in the UK due to symptoms related to the menopause. 25% of women going through the menopause have considered leaving work because of their experiences.

When workplaces do not support women, symptoms such as hot flushes, irregular and heavy bleeding, fatigue and poor memory, can lead to loss of confidence, decreased productivity, time off work, and less satisfaction with their job.

Organisations signing the 'Menopause Workplace Pledge' will commit to recognising that the menopause is an issue in the workplace, and take positive action, so that affected women and employees can be fully supported.

Supporting women and employees affected by the menopause can help attract and improve retention of staff, ensure a diverse and inclusive workforce, increase productivity, maximise employee wellbeing and address the gender pay gap.

Wellbeing of Women will share case studies and resources on examples of best practice on how employers can support women and staff in the workplace.

Theory of change: Organisations that sign the Menopause Workplace Pledge will be more likely to make changes to their culture, processes and policies, which will make a material improvement to the working conditions of women going through the menopause. This will increase the number of women who are fully supported in the workplace.

Individuals that sign up to say "I want my workplace to support women going through the menopause" will receive emails with practical advice on how to encourage their employer to sign the pledge. Leaders of companies that receive pressure from employees to sign the pledge are more likely to do so.

Some of the resources that Wellbeing of Women will be sharing with employers may include the following:

ACAS: <https://www.acas.org.uk/archive/menopause-at-work>

NHS Employers: <https://www.nhsemployers.org/articles/menopause-and-workplace>

CIPD: <https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/culture/well-being/menopause/people-manager-guidance#gref>

Hempicked: <https://menopauseintheworkplace.co.uk/about-us/>

Menopause Friendly Accreditation: <https://menopausefriendly.co.uk>

Menopause Experts: <https://menopauseexperts.com/>

Unison: <https://www.unison.org.uk/tag/menopause/>

TUC: <https://www.tuc.org.uk/menopause-work>

The pledge

Wellbeing of Women are calling on employers to take positive action to make sure women going through the menopause are fully supported. The first step is to sign up to our 'Menopause

Workplace Pledge’.

In signing up to this pledge:

1. We recognise that the menopause can be an issue in the workplace and women need our support
2. We will talk openly, positively and respectfully about the menopause
3. We commit to actively support and inform our employees affected by the menopause

Women’s Voices

As part of background research, and incorporating feedback from women, Wellbeing of Women conducted a focus group with a group of 10 individuals on Friday 6 August 2021. The campaign clearly resonated with the group of women, who welcomed the focus on improving support for women in the workplace.

Women shared personal stories of their experiences of the impact of menopausal symptoms in the workplace, including one account of a woman who resigned due to lack of support. She experienced heavy menstrual bleeding and found it difficult to concentrate in her day-to-day job. Another woman talked about the impact of ‘brain fog’ on her ability to concentrate.

Roundtable Event

Wellbeing of Women is delighted that, to launch the ‘Menopause Workplace Pledge’ campaign, our Royal Patron, HRH The Countess of Wessex – who has previously spoken about her experience of going through the menopause – and Chair, Professor Dame Lesley Regan, will host a virtual roundtable event.

This event will include representatives from organisations who are engaged in, or would like help in, addressing menopause in their workplaces and will bring to light the workplace specific issues facing women going through the menopause as well as discussing potential actions employers can take.

The range of top speakers from leading organisations demonstrate the significant interest in the topic of improving the workplace for women and employees going through the menopause.

To date, some of the confirmed speakers and participants include:

- Natasha Adams, Chief People Officer, Tesco
- Alex Perry, CEO, BUPA Insurance
- Caroline Nokes MP, Chair of the Women’s Inequalities Select Committee
- Carolyn Harris, MP, APPG on the Menopause
- Barbara Claypole to give a woman’s experience in the workplace
- Christine Palmer, Chief Risk Officer, Santander
- Sarah Churchman OBE, Chief Inclusion, Community & Wellbeing Officer, PWC
- Claire McCartney, Senior Policy Advisor, CIPD
- Rosie Nixon, Editor in Chief of Hello! Magazine
- Julie Cridland, Employee Experience Lead, Aster Group
- Sarah Cale, Founder, Positive Menopause
- Deborah Garlick, Director, Henpicked: Menopause in the Workplace
- Claire Hardy, Wellbeing of Women researcher on the menopause
- Maxine Benson, Co-Founder, Every Woman
- Uma Cresswell, President and Chair of the City Woman Network
- Vanessa Vallely, CEO, We are the City

The event will be recorded on Zoom and released as part of the campaign launch on Tuesday 5 October to mark the start of Menopause Awareness Month.

4. What are examples of best or most inclusive practices?

Companies that promote an open and inclusive culture and talk openly about the menopause:

PwC has created a menopause Hub which all its staff are able to access. It is an information resource for people with helpful information about symptoms, treatments, how staff can access support, and who to contact. It also signposts to other helpful resources.

Aster Group has done some brilliant work around creating a menopause friendly workplace. They listened to a number of female staff and started with informal coffee sessions to talk about menopause. This is something we hear many companies start with and find really useful. It helps women to know that they aren't alone, and they don't have to suffer symptoms in silence - that they can share their experiences.

From anecdotal experience of talking to companies, it seems that once they make a start, they receive such brilliant feedback from affected staff that it drives them to go further, take on more feedback and continue to make positive changes.

We have spoken to companies who have had menopause raised as an issue off the back of their work around improving mental health and this seems to be a relatively common theme.

From focus group: *"Filling in sickness form – we've now had 'menopause symptoms' added to our checklist which was a great win."*

5. How should people who experience the menopause but do not identify as women be supported in relation to menopause and the workplace?

At Wellbeing of Women, we regularly use the terms woman, women and women's health. However, it is important to note that it is not only women who experience the menopause. Some trans men and non-binary people may also need support from their employers whilst experiencing menopause symptoms. Employers must ensure workplaces are appropriate, inclusive and sensitive to the needs of all people, including those whose gender identity does not align with the sex they were assigned at birth. This is why we also refer to "women and staff", "women and employees" and "people affected by the menopause" in our communications and suggest employers also adopt inclusive language as well.

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