



CONVERSATION STARTERS

- **Ten days sick and carer's leave is simply not enough!**

Australian workers are entitled to access up to ten days paid sick or carer's leave every year under the National and Queensland Employment Standard if they are unfit for work because of an illness or personal injury.

However, today many workers, particularly those who have responsibility for caring for children often have to use their personal sick leave as carer's leave. Many organisations also strongly encourage people who are sick to stay home or keep their children from childcare to prevent the spread of illnesses.

Taking sick leave when you are sick is also a health and safety issue – a personal health issue to make sure you get better and recuperate – and a work health and safety issue to ensure that illnesses are not being spread at work.

How fair is it then for employees with reproductive health issues to have to use all of their sick leave, annual leave and take unpaid leave to deal with an ongoing reproductive health issue?

- **All employees can experience a reproductive health issue at any time in their working life.**

All workers may experience a reproductive health issue at any point in their working life. Reproductive health affects both women and men.

It can include women with endometriosis or dysmenorrhea (heavy chronic periods), to couples or individuals seeking IVF or IUI treatment, to older women experiencing peri or menopausal symptoms.

Sometimes women and men need to have surgical procedures related to their reproductive health such as a termination, hysterectomy, or a vasectomy – which will require time off work to undertake the procedure and time to recover.

It's also important that all employees undertake preventative reproductive healthcare measures – to screen for things like prostate, cervical and breast cancers. Early detection of these types of health issues can result in better treatment options and saving lives.



- **We need to reduce the stigma around reproductive health.**

Many older employees, and employees from some cultures, have grown up in an environment where they were actively discouraged from talking about reproductive health issues. This means that many people simply won't talk about these issues or feel ashamed of what are normal bodily reproductive health issues.

In some cases, this results in employees not seeking early detection or screening for reproductive health issues that can lead to cancer – breast, cervical or prostate – or they don't seek medical advice about the pain or other symptoms they may experience – sometimes until too late.

That's why it's important that people are able to speak up about common reproductive health issues, or simply listen to others talking about them. It's also important that we can talk about flexibility around our work and reproductive health and that individuals are not adversely affected.

For instance, ABS data shows that the main factor for all employees that influences their decision about when they retire is their financial security. But Australian women are currently retiring 7.4 years earlier than men, even though the majority one third of retired women rely upon their partner's income to meet their living costs in retirement (compared to 7 per cent of men).

In March 2024, the Association of Superannuation Funds of Australia (ASFA) released a report showing women could forgo around \$60,000 from their final superannuation payout because they are unable to continue working with menopausal symptoms – or be \$25,000 worse off working part time over a four year period.

What about flexible work arrangements?

Some employees can currently access flexible work arrangements under the Fair Work Act if they are –

- pregnant
- are a parent, or have responsibility for the care of a child is of school age or younger
- have a disability
- are 55 or older
- are experiencing family or domestic violence, or



- provide care or support to a member of their immediate family or household requiring care or support because they are experiencing family or domestic violence.

A flexible work arrangement allows an employee to request to different hours of work or work in different places.

We think this should also include a right to access flexible work if you have a reproductive health reason.

Having a reproductive health issue means an employee may need flexibility to attend IVF treatment at the last minute based on their fertility cycle, or work from home on days when their periods are excessively heavy, or to help them recover from a procedure.

The point is we need a minimum right to ask for flexibility to suit individual arrangements.

Key Statistics:

Reproductive health issues are more common than you think. Did you know that:

- One million Australian women are estimated to have endometriosis.
- One in six Australian couples experience fertility issues and one in eighteen babies are now being born as a result of IVF treatment.
- One in four men over the age of forty are having a vasectomy.
- Between two thirds and three quarters of Australian women will have a termination.
- Breast cancer is the most common form of cancer diagnosed for Australian women with around 8 deaths prevented for every 1000 women screened every two years.
- The National Cervical Screening Program has halved cervical cancer incident and mortality since its introduction in 1991.
- One in seven Australian men will experience prostate issues and early diagnosis and treatment can help before it causes symptoms or spreads.