

# **Submission from the South Australian Men's Health Alliance Inc. (SAMHA) to the Productivity Commission's Investigation into Paid Parental Leave**

## ***Background***

### **South Australian Men's Health Alliance (SAMHA)**

The South Australian Men's Health Alliance is an alliance of men and women from a variety of backgrounds across rural and metropolitan SA who are actively engaged in promoting men's health and wellbeing, and advocating for men's issues.

SAMHA is committed to achieving its objectives with adherence to principles of equity, justice, and intellectual integrity.

This submission represents the needs and views of the many men who SAMHA engages with, either as members or in the broader community. In providing a perspective that highlights the needs of men, SAMHA in no way seeks to devalue, or to challenge the maternity needs of women, but seeks to acknowledge the needs of **both** parents in the ongoing care of their children.

More information about SAMHA's philosophy and objectives can be found at [www.menshealthaustralia.com.au](http://www.menshealthaustralia.com.au)

## ***Fatherhood and men's health***

Fatherhood provides many opportunities for maintaining and improving men's health. Given the opportunity to be an involved and engaged father, men can assume a role that is personally rewarding but also makes them feel valued, as a member of their family and in the eyes of society.

These opportunities are very important for men's health and well being, and becoming a father is a very powerful underpinning of self esteem, self identity and a man's sense of value and importance in society.

### **Establishing a rich and rewarding interpersonal relationship with their children**

Interpersonal relationships are critical to men's health and wellbeing, even though this is usually portrayed as the domain of motherhood. However, evidence shows that fathers' involvement in their children's lives has positive impacts on the child's development generally, but particularly in areas including self-esteem, emotional

well-being, capacity to love and be loved, and their ability to participate in society. Of course, men also benefit from being part of these rich and rewarding relationships.

### **Enabling men to love and nurture their children as fathers**

Again, this is often portrayed as the domain of motherhood, but it is central to the identity of fatherhood to provide love and nurturing to children. In many relationships, this will be qualitatively different to the love and nurturing provided by a mother. Fathers need to be able to express these parenting qualities as fathers, not as imitation mothers, as it builds their self-esteem and identity as a father while giving all the benefits of being in a role that loves and nurtures others.

### **Allowing men to accept the responsibilities of fatherhood**

For many men, the recognition they get for 'being a dad' is about their ability to be a provider or breadwinner for the family, and to support their wife or partner as she goes about the actual business of parenting. By itself, this is not beneficial to men's health, as it becomes one dimensional and over exposes men to workplace risks and the detrimental effects of working longer hours without the benefits of being actively engaged with the family, and increase the pressure felt by partners and other family members.

While financial pressures mean that many men do sacrifice their personal family relationships in favour of better paid jobs or longer work hours, fatherhood should be an opportunity for men to take responsibility to make choices and establish a work life balance that maintains financial security for their family while being an active and engaged parent.

For some men, this may mean being a full time stay at home dad while supporting their partner to earn the money, for others it will mean full time work while their partner supports them. Either way, making an informed decision and balancing these responsibilities is beneficial for men's self esteem and identity, while being relegated to the "father as breadwinner" role by default is health diminishing.

## **Parental Leave**

Generally, SAMHA supports the approach to parental leave that has been described in the submission made by Dads on the Air, including the *modified* version of the current proposal by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC).

Although SAMHA has a stated agenda to advocate for the needs of men as fathers, we do not recognize the importance of one kind of parent over another. Nor does

SAMHA believe that mothers, fathers and other parents are interchangeable or universal, both in terms of the language used and the roles undertaken.

Instead, SAMHA recognizes the uniqueness and diversity that different types of parents bring, and encourages the establishment of parental leave that is not based on biological motherhood or fatherhood, or on the assumption that the mother is, or should be, the “primary” care provider of the child.

### **Benefits of including paid paternal leave**

The more obvious benefits of offering leave time and flexible working arrangements for fathers include, but are not limited to:

- The availability of time to spend with your new baby and partner, and the development of the father child relationship
- The increased opportunity for mutual support provided to each other by parents
- An increase in father’s practical and emotional involvement in the care of their children
- The development of patterns of behaviour resulting in longer term involvement of fathers in their children’s lives and care
- The opportunity for more equitable care patterns of involvement between mothers and fathers
- Increased flexibility and choice for families in determining care for their children

The other benefits of offering paid paternity and parental leave include supporting working mothers who may be more likely to return to work knowing that their children are under parental care. This may also avoid covert discrimination against working mothers, where there may be concerns about their retention and the loss of skilled labour should they become pregnant, and are unable to return to work due to the lack of availability of leave for their partners.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this submission is to engage with, and to support, thinking and consideration of issues regarding to men’s health and paid parental leave. It is not the purpose of this submission to discuss the needs of women and the merits of

maternity leave – although SAMHA fully recognises and supports the principle of paid maternity leave

SAMHA supports paid leave for fathers which:

- Recognizes their equal importance as parents
- Gives them an opportunity to establish their parental role at the beginning of their child's life
- Recognises the importance of fatherhood to the health and wellbeing of men
- Recognises the importance of fathers to the health and wellbeing of children
- Acknowledges the difficulties experienced by men, due to workplace and other demands, in the negotiation and determination of how leave is taken

SAMHA does not support paid parental leave that describes fathers as partners, or describes paternity leave as partner leave, or uses language that suggests that the primary role of fathers is to support their partner. Fathers must continue to be recognised as parents in their own right.

SAMHA, also extends the vast experience and knowledge of its membership and consultative base in the area of men's health and men's issues to the development of parental leave policy.

Robert Denton (Secretary)

For

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