

The Hobart Women's Health Centre (HWHC) is twenty-one this year and is the only women's health centre in Tasmania. The Centre recognises gender as a social determinant of health and has a commitment to addressing both the medical and non-medical, expressed in Health Canada's *Women's Health Strategy* as including: "income and social status; employment; education; social environments; physical environments; healthy child development; personal health practices and coping skills; health services; social support networks; gender and culture".

We aim to promote positive health outcomes by providing a diverse range of services, which take a holistic approach to health. The Centre offers access to a GP, health workers, complimentary health practitioners and various physical activity facilitators. We also provide community education, information and resources. All our services are either free or low cost.

This submission is the HWHC's response to the Productivity Commission's Draft Inquiry Report on Paid Parental Leave.

Hobart Women's Health Centre is in favour of paid maternity/paternity leave. Currently, the Centre offers our own employees twelve weeks maternity leave on full pay, this despite being a small non-profit and under-funded community organisation. Workers are eligible for this leave after one full year's employment at the Centre. This scheme has been in place for over sixteen years.

Australia has the unenviable title of being one of only two OECD countries without some sort of paid parental scheme. Finally, after thirty long years of debate, the Commission's recommendations are a great first step towards ensuring a fundamental human right - that paid parental leave should be provided to all parental carers. While the recommendations are welcomed by the HWHC, there are issues we are keen to see considered before the final report is tabled. We would also like to see a review process put in place, once a scheme is up and running, with a commitment to continuous improvement. HWHC considers Australia should be a world leader, setting the standard for best practice concerning paid parental leave.

Currently only one third of Australian women have access to paid parental leave - and they are invariably employees with strong bargaining positions. The other two-thirds have no access. In the retail and hospitality industries, areas dominated by women, only 8% of women have access to paid maternity leave.

HWHC is supportive of existing employer schemes remaining and complementing any government schemes in the future. The Commission's current recommendation of eighteen weeks leave, to be taken after any other paid maternity leave provided by the employer and within six months of the birth of the baby, does not allow for sufficient flexibility. The first twelve months of a child's life are crucial to their development. The longer parents are able to remain at home with their children, the greater the health and well-being benefits - to the children and our society. Parents should be given the opportunity to work out the longest possible time they can afford to stay at home. If the Commission's recommendation is adopted, a woman taking fourteen weeks of employer-funded maternity leave at half pay over twenty-eight weeks would go over the six month (twenty six weeks) deadline for accessing the additional eighteen weeks paid leave offered by the government. Therefore, she would miss out altogether.

Parents deserve the choice of taking the recommended government-funded eighteen weeks of paid parental leave at half pay over thirty-six weeks. For parents suffering ill health before the birth of their child, there should be the flexibility to take leave before the birth - particularly in cases where all other leave has been exhausted.

The qualifying period recommended by the Commission could disadvantage parents who may have been working for twelve months or more, but whose hours fall slightly short because of unavoidable gaps between shifts or jobs, particularly if they are casual employees. Greater flexibility is required to establish workforce attachment.

The Draft Report also recommends parents must fulfill the same qualifying period for subsequent children and that any time taken as leave without pay does not count. This qualification denies parents real choice in determining the length of time between children.

The HWHC supports the Commission's preferred model, wherein the government funds minimum wage and the employer covers superannuation contributions. However, we view this as a valid starting point but not a fair position. HWHC is of the opinion that parental leave should be paid at the parent's substantive rate, possibly with an upper limit. We recognise the costs to government and/or the employer would increase significantly, but believe this needs to be considered in the future.

Young people on junior wages should be entitled to the same parental payments as adults, not 60% of the minimum wage as recommended by the Commission. Living expenses and the costs of raising a child are the same for a young person as they are for older parents. The suggestion that paying young people at the same rate as adults would create an incentive to have a child, because they will receive more money than they do under the current baby bonus, is offensive. The birth rate to parents under eighteen years has actually decreased since the introduction of the baby bonus.

Under this proposed model, "stay at home" mums would receive substantially less and should be offered an equivalent payment. The HWHC would like to see an end to this artificial distinction, as most women work until their first child is born and the majority return to work when their children are older.

The Centre favours paid leave for fathers and same-sex partners. We accept the additional two weeks recommended in the Productivity Commission's Draft Report as a good start; and, the Commission's recommendation allowing parents the flexibility to share the eighteen weeks is to be applauded. However, we believe this should be reviewed in the future. HWHC believes, in a society truly valuing the importance of parenting, both parents should be offered the same length of paid leave.

Parents adopting should be eligible for parental leave regardless of the age of the child. In fact, creating a bond with older children takes even more time and effort than with a newborn. People caring full time for babies of another family member or fostering should also be entitled to paid parenting leave.

The loss of a wanted child, whether via miscarriage or stillbirth, is a dramatic and devastating event. HWHC is concerned by the recommendation that stillborn babies meet the requirement for birth registration in Australia for their parents to be eligible for entitlement to paid parental leave. More flexibility may be required in this area particularly if no other leave is available to the parents.

Parents deserve the choice as to whether or not they use up other leave entitlements after the birth of a child. However, the Centre is supportive of a cap on the amount of sick leave, which can be taken, as it will possibly be needed after returning to work to care for a sick child.