



Senate Community Affairs References Committee's inquiry into issues related to menopause and perimenopause

**Prepared by
COTA Australia**

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About COTA Australia

COTA Australia is the peak body representing the almost nine million Australians over 50. Since 1958 our systemic advocacy has been improving the diverse lives of older people in policy areas such as health, retirement incomes, and more. Our broad agenda is focussed on tackling ageism, respecting diversity, and the empowerment of older people to live life to the full.

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Contents

Executive Summary	4
Introduction	7
Terms of Reference – a) The economic consequences of menopause and perimenopause, including but not limited to, reduced workforce participation, productivity, and retirement planning.	9
Workforce participation	11
Retirement and retirement planning	13
Terms of Reference – g) the level of awareness amongst employers and workers of the symptoms of menopause and perimenopause, and the awareness, availability and usage of workplace supports	14
Awareness of employers and colleagues	15
Suggestions for making workplaces more menopause aware and sensitive	17
1. Awareness – building understanding and empathy at all levels	18
2. A focus on education and training for managers and supervisors	18
3. Flexible work practices and practical support	19
4. Resources for employees experiencing menopause and perimenopause.....	20
Other suggestions for Government	20

Executive Summary

Health is a key strategic priority for COTA Australia. As the peak body for older Australians and in embracing our vision of “an equitable, just and inclusive society”¹ we need to recognise that the issues related to menopause and perimenopause are first and foremost about age and gender equity. Gendered ageism is locking older women out of being able to fully participate in the economy.

Adding to the existing research, enhancing our own policy development and extending our engagement with older women on this topic, we held focus groups throughout February 2024. Older women told us that menopause signifies yet another way women are disadvantaged when it comes to realising their right to access equal opportunities in paid work,² and not having their workplace participation restricted or denied. People experiencing menopause are no different to other employees, *we need supportive work conditions that help us to thrive* (February '24 focus participant). Yet, in many workplaces, employees experiencing menopausal symptoms, especially if severe, are considered past their ‘usefulness date’ and an economic drain.

In reality you’re just at midlife and if you were not a perimenopausal woman, you would be considered at the peak of your career. However, although highly experienced and well credentialled, there are times when I need support. But I am afraid to ask as I fear keeping my job. (February '24 focus group participant).

Women of a menopausal age are a growing segment of the Australian workforce.³ Menopause is a natural part of life for half (at least 51%)⁴ of the population. A better understanding of menopause as a natural life transition is a critical workplace issue. Establishing measures to value the experience and expertise of older women in the workplace is in everyone’s interest – businesses, partners’/families’ and the economy as a whole. We must build on the work this Senate Community Affairs References Committee’s Inquiry has started to eliminate discriminatory attitudes and practices that adversely impact women’s health, wellbeing, relationships and workplace participation.

¹ Strategic Plan 2021-25, Council on the Ageing, <https://cota.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/COTA-Strategic-Plan-2021-25-FINAL.pdf.pdf>

² Colussi, S. Hill, E. & Baird M. Engendering the Right to Work in International Law: Recognising Menstruation and Menopause in Paid Work. University of Oxford Human Rights Hub Journal. Nov.'23. Abstract available within article at: <https://www.sydney.edu.au/news-opinion/news/2023/11/08/workplace-protections-needed-for-menstruation-and-menopause.html>

³ AIFS. Employment of men and women across the life course. Male and female labour force participation by age. May '23. Access at [https://aifs.gov.au/research/facts-and-figures/employment-men-and-women-across-life-course#:~:text=Long%2Dterm%20trends,1979%20\(see%20Figure%203\).](https://aifs.gov.au/research/facts-and-figures/employment-men-and-women-across-life-course#:~:text=Long%2Dterm%20trends,1979%20(see%20Figure%203).)

⁴ AIHW. The health of Australia’s females. Jun.'23. Accessible at: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/men-women/female-health/contents/who-are>

By not valuing the experiences and expertise of older women, we are robbing current, as well as future generations. Employers and businesses can help our economy be more productive by empowering older women to work for as long as they want to and by adopting policies that are menopause and perimenopause aware and sensitive.

Government has to take a leadership role with policies and actions that empower and harness the strengths and capabilities of older women.

The Australian Government should:

1. commission research into:
 - the impact of perimenopause and menopause on access to work and participation in workplaces across sectors, including those fields dominated by casual and part-time workers
 - best practice in menopause and perimenopause support and promote the findings through a report and national traditional and social media campaign
2. examine the adequacy of existing leave entitlements to cover menopause and perimenopause under the National Employment Standards
3. work with national and specialist health and women's organisations (including organisations of older women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led organisations, organisations representing migrant and refugee women, organisations representing people of diverse genders, and organisations representing women and girls with disability) to develop educational resources for women in workplaces about their rights at work while experiencing perimenopause and menopause⁵
4. collaborate with peak employer bodies and peak and specialist women's organisations to build menopause and perimenopause awareness – building understanding of the impacts on individual lives and empathy at all levels

⁵ Recommendations 1-3 reflect COTA Australia's support and membership of the Equality Rights Alliance. <https://www.equalityrightsalliance.org.au/>

Employers and businesses should:

5. work with employees to develop and implement flexible workplace policies and approaches that support employees experiencing menopause and perimenopause to maximise their contribution to the workplace.

For instance:

- introduce paid (inclusive of superannuation) menopause and perimenopause leave for all employees
- implement a flexible work policy that allows people experiencing menopause and perimenopause symptoms to work inside or outside of core hours
- enhance work from home provisions for people experiencing menopause and perimenopause symptoms
- sponsor whole of organisation training on menopause symptoms and impacts
- introduce the necessary workplace adjustments (such as the introduction of cool rooms) and supports required by employees experiencing menopause and perimenopause symptoms
- create an environment in which employees feel safe to discuss their experience of menopause and perimenopause

Managers and supervisors have a critical role to play in dismantling workplace discrimination and stigma. They are also vital to ensuring the establishment of workplace environments which optimise work performance, resiliency, engagement, skill development and career opportunities for all team members.

Introduction

COTA Australia welcomes the Senate Community Affairs References Committee's (Committee) inquiry into issues related to menopause and perimenopause. We congratulate the Committee on drawing public attention to what is a gender and age equity matter. For far too long societal ignorance, stigma and discrimination around menopause and perimenopause have had:

1. serious and lasting implications for women's health, wellbeing, personal relationships, workforce participation and finances
2. limited and devalued the rich, multifaceted contributions of women to the social and economic prosperity of our nation.

While our submission refers specifically to women's experiences of menopause and perimenopause,⁶ we know non-binary, gender diverse or non-gendered people can also experience these life events. Any response to the impact of menopause should be inclusive of any individual who experiences it.

This submission focuses primarily on issues related to menopause and perimenopause in the workforce, as highlighted in the following terms of reference of the Inquiry:

- a) the economic consequences of menopause and perimenopause, including but not limited to, reduced workforce participation, productivity, and retirement planning
- g) the level of awareness amongst employers and workers of the symptoms of menopause and perimenopause, and the awareness, availability and usage of workplace supports.

In responding to the above, our submission also references the impacts of menopausal and perimenopausal symptoms on women's:

- b) physical health
- c) mental and emotional well-being – considering issues like mental health, self-esteem, and social support
- d) on caregiving responsibilities, family dynamics, and relationships

The information presented in our submission is based on current research, COTA Australia's policy positions and our ongoing engagement with older women. We also hosted three (3) focus groups (a total of 20 participants) in February 2024. We chose this format to complement the existing research and provide a more detailed and nuanced conversation on the matter rather than present broad statistics. The purpose of these discussions was to hear from women about their:

⁶ Most people who menstruate transition to menopause and experience perimenopausal symptoms between 45 and 60 years of age. Within the remainder of our submission, we are using the term 'menopause' as being inclusive of menopause, perimenopause and post menopause.

1. lived experience of menopause and perimenopause and how this impacts/ed workforce participation
2. views about the types, and usefulness, of the support workplaces are offering
3. thoughts about how workplaces could foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for menopausal and perimenopausal women

Approximately 75% of participants said that menopause had had (or is having) a negative impact on their workforce participation. Twenty-five percent said they had received, or are currently receiving, some form of workplace support. Of this group, while 85% said they found informal support (mainly from female colleagues around the same age or older) useful, formal workplace support was in short supply, lacking and/or misdirected. These findings complement those of other studies on menopausal employees' perceptions of support offered to them in the workplace.⁷

After weeks of trying to discuss this with my line manager, I approached my senior manager and asked about the possibility of having the workplace temperature altered. I was finding it suffocatingly hot. I was told this was not possible as the temperature was considered comfortable for a workplace. I was also told I could not extend my working from home days from 2 to 4. Before I had time to engage in further conversation, I was handed our organisation's EPA [Employee Assistance Program] brochure. This all happened nicely. But there was no positive outcome for me as an employee. (Feb.'24 COTA Australia focus group participant).

Focus group participants were adamant that workplaces are failing in not understanding the significant impact menopause can have on a women's life. Plus, they were unanimous that if workplaces are genuinely committed to **fostering inclusive and supportive environments for menopausal and perimenopausal women** they will need to understand the importance of raising awareness of menopause, as well as being flexible in supporting menopausal women's workplace participation.

Going through perimenopause, the problem I'm finding with contemporary workplaces which also applies to having a disability, is having standardised normalised systems and seeing them as fair – standard norms and saying, you know, that equality when really what

⁷ Circle In, Driving the change: Menopause and the workplace, 2021. Access at: <https://circlein.com/research-and-guides/menopause-at-work/>

you want is equity. And you want some respect in that process. And the value to say, perimenopause is a health issue. But it's not a health issue as in terms of 'I've got COVID ... and I need a few days off. (Feb.'24 COTA Australia focus group participant).

COTA Australia's advocacy calls for societal and employment-related changes that enable employees to thrive both as individuals, and as vital contributors to the nation's economic prosperity.

The specific challenges faced by menopausal employees is enmeshed in the broader manifestations of gendered ageism. The women we engaged with recently indicated that some organisations are progressing menopause-sensitive workplace practices. However, the general agreement was that societal ignorance and discriminatory workplace attitudes and practices regarding the experience of menopause continue to be well entrenched in most workplaces.

We are missing out on a huge chunk of economic participants in this country who still have at the very least 10 years to contribute to this economy. Importantly this chunk has a lot of experience and expertise built up. And they know – I reckon a lot of us know we are being sidelined. Workplaces don't have to accept mediocrity from us, but they need to understand that I'm challenged. I am really struggling, and I need a bit of support. (Feb.'24 COTA Australia focus group participant).

Commitment to age and gender equity necessitates that support of menopausal women is part of business as usual.

Terms of Reference – a) The economic consequences of menopause and perimenopause, including but not limited to, reduced workforce participation, productivity, and retirement planning.

Although it is critical to see menopause as a natural process it is **just one point in a continuum of life stages**. Women's lived experience tells us the menopausal transition can prove to be a time of anxiety and distress, and for some women it can have an overwhelming and enduring impact on their everyday lives – including the quality of family relationships, caring responsibilities, and workplace participation.

Menopause occurs over an extended period (usually lasts for 7 years but can be as long as 14 years)⁸ and often happens in an extremely busy/demanding time of a women's life. A common theme highlighted in our discussions with women is that menopause is not experienced in isolation.

It is hits you like a train wreck when there is so much else going on in your life. Yeah! Yeah! It's children. Your parents. Your family. There're so many things going on at the one time. Then this manipulative thing sort of invades and takes over your body. You just have to push through. (Feb.'24 COTA Australia focus group participant).

Menopause affects women differently.⁹ Changing hormone levels can produce different symptoms with -approximately 20% of women having - no symptoms at all and 80% having moderate to severe symptoms that interfere with their daily lives,¹⁰ including an impact on their workplace performance and relationships.

During our February '24 focus group participants used many words to convey the impact of menopause on their workplace participation and productivity with frequently articulated descriptors being:

- *debilitating*
- *stigma*
- *shame*
- *disempowering*
- *isolating*
- *awful*
- *unpredictable*
- *frustrating*
- *confusing*
- *anxiety provoking*
- *stressful*
- *misunderstood*

A 2021 Australian-based study found 83% of women experiencing menopause believe the symptoms affected their workplace performance and engagement.¹¹ The study asserts that without appropriate/tailored workplace-based support, menopause symptoms can dramatically reduce workforce participation or push an employee to prematurely contemplate or action retirement.

⁸ What is menopause? NIH. National Institute on Ageing. Access at: <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/menopause/what-menopause#:~:text=The%20menopausal%20transition%20most%20often,begins%2C%20and%20race%20and%20ethni city.>

⁹ Australian Menopause Society. Fact Sheets. Menopause what are the symptoms. Access at: <https://www.menopause.org.au/health-info/fact-sheets>

¹⁰ Jean Hailes for Women's Health. Symptoms of menopause. Access at: <https://www.jeanhailes.org.au/health-a-z/menopause/menopause-symptoms>

¹¹ Circle In, Driving the change: Menopause and the workplace, 2021. Access at: <https://circlein.com/research-and-guides/menopause-at-work/>

Workforce participation

The National Women's Health Survey¹² found that one-quarter of Australian women aged 45 to 65 reported that symptoms (experienced in the last five years) that they attributed to menopause made it hard to do daily activities. In terms of impact on workplace performance:

- 17% of women aged 45 to 64 reported taking an extended break from work in the last five years.¹³
- 10% of menopausal employees quit their job altogether.¹⁴
- 14% drop their hours.¹⁵
- *Most* women who report experiencing menopausal symptoms at work said these negatively affected not only their workplace productivity but their relationships with colleagues.¹⁶

COTA Australia's February '24 focus group participants were unanimous that menopause symptoms can adversely impact an employee's workplace performance, participation and relationships. Their comments below align with other research findings.

You just kind of try and shrink into the corner. I find myself scuttling out of meetings. You feel a crushing lack of self-confidence because you are the so-called expert in the room, and I can't even pull it together

I get quite bad headaches. They can impact on me for 4 days at a time. As far as being productive at work, I am a shadow of my former self. I don't even know who I am. Right now, I'm just dragging myself along. As I said to my husband, I'm surviving, but barely.

I am definitely not thriving. I can no longer aim for the stars. I can just aim to get through this moment now. This has huge ramifications. I

¹² Coauthored by the Australasian Menopause Society, Women's Health Research Program (Monash University) and Jean Hailes for Women's Health. The impact of symptoms attributed to menopause by Australian women - A report from the 2023 National Women's Health Survey. Access at: <https://www.jeanhailes.org.au/research/womens-health-survey/menopause-in-australian-women>

¹³ The Australian Institute of Superannuation Trustees. AIST Submission to Treasury. Accessible at: chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgclefindmkaj/https://treasury.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-03/c2023-379612-australian_institute_of_superannuation_trustees.pdf

¹⁴ Australian Menopause Society. IMS Menopause Live Menopause and work. Jan.2017. Access at: [Menopause and work - Australasian Menopause Society](#)

¹⁵ *ibid*

¹⁶ House of Commons Report. Menopause and the Workplace. Jul.'22. UK. Access at: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmwomeq/91/report.html>

must hold onto my job for now, I don't want to be in a position where I cannot provide for my adolescent children. I think for me one of the key things is just feeling disassociated from everyone. I used to have good relationships at work. But I don't even have the energy to maintain these. This is really impacting me and, therefore, my work.

It's the crushing lack of self-confidence and self-doubt. The whole brain fog. I will literally be in a meeting and halfway through making an important point and then nothing. Then I kind of zone out because this is a complete embarrassment.

At the time, I didn't have a GP who was switched on. I was told I was depressed. By the way, so much rigmarole around hot flushes being the big symptom. For me it was more the inability to think. Plus, I had so much going on. Teenage kids and caring for an elderly mother. For me, the hardest thing was to step back. I went part time. Menopause was not talked about in the workplace. It just wasn't discussed.

The only reason I've been able to sustain work is because I work part time flexibly, and my manager has said that I can work 3.5 days over 4 days. Now I can get up much later. If it wasn't for that – you know I often have only 2 hours sleep. I cannot function properly on 2 hours sleep. However, can juggle my time. Find my time in the day to do the work and be productive.

The past 2 years have been really bad... hot flashes, disturbed sleep and great tiredness ... and I am not yet menopausal... in terms of workforce participation ... it's reduced my hours significantly, which is having a significant effect on my pay and super. I'm single so I rely on my income. I'd actually stop work if I could because life would be so much easier. But I can't. I need the income. Career prospects? I'm not doing training, I not taking on additional duties. I can't stretch myself I just barely coping with what I've got to do to keep going.

Retirement and retirement planning

According to Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data, the average retirement age is **52.1 for women** and 59.5 for men. Plus, women retire with 40% less superannuation than men and they live longer.¹⁷

As one COTA Australia Feb.'24 focus group member shared:

The system, the way it works here in Australia is that you have to earn your comfortable retirement yourself, through the superannuation system. Plus, it's generally known that it is in the last years of your career you contribute the most. And this is going to have the most impact on the rest of your life – that is post-retirement. Right. ...Due to being incorrectly diagnosed, I lost my job. My career ended before I wanted it to. I feel I've been disadvantaged enormously because of menopause. Not only from an economic perspective but also the social relationships.

Even though, there are few Australian 'gold standard' research studies into the role menopause plays in influencing retirement decisions, available research indicates that **menopause can be a key factor** in some women's decision to retire early.¹⁸

For instance:

- survey results such as those undertaken by Jean Hailes for Women's Health indicate that menopause can be a key factor in some women's decision to retire early.
- the AIST report says less than a half of the women who retired earlier than expected (44.9%) cited 'own sickness, injury or disability' as a reason for leaving their last job.

The AIST report asserts menopause could currently be costing Australian women a collective loss of \$15.2 billion in foregone income and super for every year of early retirement. Over an average 7.4 years of missed earnings opportunity, this amounts to an economic loss of \$112.2 billion.¹⁸

¹⁷ <https://www.professionalplanner.com.au/2023/02/aist-renews-call-to-measure-menopause-impact-as-estimated-cost-soars/>

¹⁸ AIST. Measuring what matters: Understanding our economy and society while informing policy making.

Commenting on the findings from AIST research findings, the Financial Standard has identified menopause as **the silent economic crisis robbing women of billions in retirement**.¹⁹

Terms of Reference – g) the level of awareness amongst employers and workers of the symptoms of menopause and perimenopause, and the awareness, availability and usage of workplace supports

Women aged 50 years and older are the fastest growing segment of the workforce.²⁰

Even though at least 51% of the population will experience menopause, gendered ageism means that current workplace-based support is inadequate for the over 3 million employees (aged between 40 and 59 years) who are likely to be transitioning through menopause.

Menopause is a gender and age-equity workplace issue. However, it is rarely talked about openly and there appears to be little understanding of how it can impact employee performance. COTA Australia's focus group participants said that as an employee experiencing menopausal symptoms, other than from female colleagues the same age or older, the only form of workplace recognition they received was in the form of snide remarks or hurtful ageist-gender jokes.

It's lovely being here [focus group] today and hearing about other people going through menopause. However, I try and keep quiet about it at work. I fear that if I talk about how menopause is affecting me, I open myself up to all sorts of jokes and unhelpful comments. I witnessed it happening to others ... it really worries me. In our workplace there is so much uncertainty. I don't want to put my hand up to be literally in the firing line. (Feb.'24 COTA Australia focus group participant).

¹⁹ Jamie Williamson. Menopause: The silent economic crisis. The Financial Standard. 21 March '23. Accessible at: <https://www.financialstandard.com.au/news/menopause-the-silent-economic-crisis-179798921>

²⁰ CIPD. Manifesto for menopause at work. Oct.'23. Access at: <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.cipd.org/globalassets/media/knowledge/knowledge-hub/guides/2023-pdfs/2023-oct-menopause-manifesto-leaflet-8261.pdf>

As clearly confirmed by our focus group participants, the diversity of experience of menopause in the workplace is shaped not only by menopausal symptoms and context, but also by the physical and psychosocial characteristics of the workplace environment.²¹

It's also the light, the temperature, having to wear synthetic uniforms, the length and frequency of meetings, the proximity to toilets, the noise, whether you can sit down, if you are permitted to escape to breathe fresh air. The work environment can have a huge impact on well you're travelling on a particular day. (Feb.'24 COTA Australia focus group participant).

Awareness of employers and colleagues

COTA Australia's focus group participants agreed that in most workplaces employer awareness of the physical, emotional and psychological challenges that accompany menopause is negligible.

Views about employer awareness of the impacts of menopausal symptoms on employees in the words of Feb.'24 focus group participants:

I lost my job ... because of the lack of understanding that this [insomnia]. We're talking severe with massive adrenaline peaks which impacted my work to the point where after a few weeks ... it became chronic, to the point my work asked to go on sick leave and then eventually sacked me. I've only just one month ago found out that reason for my severe insomnia was a drop in hormones so directly related to menopause...

There are policies and training in relation to age, sexism and culture. But there is nothing around menopause.

When it comes to women there is some recognition about the diversity of women's experience. There's a focus on trying to get women into leadership positions, but not focusing on what are

²¹ A European Menopause and Andropause Society (EMAS) position statement. Found on the Australasian Menopause Society. Accessible at: <https://www.menopause.org.au/hp/position-statements/global-consensus-recommendations-on-menopause-in-the-workplace>

women's needs overall. And what does it mean to really support women in that, then help us to actually get into leaderships positions. It's the simplistic ways that inclusion, diversity and equity are being looked at, and anything that seems to cost ... is seen as problem.

At present, they wouldn't know what to do. They wouldn't know how to support me. They wouldn't have a clue. I mean, they would make all the right noises. It is like talking about mental health in the workplace. When I started working, we didn't talk about mental health. Workplaces needed to allow the conversation to occur, and I think it's exactly the same with menopause. Workplaces need to know our hormones are going wild and, to give our best, we need specific supports to help us manage through this part of our life.

In my workplace there is you know a lot of joking – there's still a lot of stigma associated with it – but little if any understanding, empathy or practical assistance. I don't think they have any insight into how menopause can impact on you and how you go about your work.

I think it is absolutely ridiculous that we have leave to produce children, but not for any other aspect of our reproductive health.

These experiences highlight the need for better training and education in workplaces. Focus group participants were adamant that addressing employers' low level of awareness about menopause and its impacts would represent a giant leap in the right direction.

The participants were unanimous that:

- menopause needs to be seen and owned as a workforce issue.
- employers need to embrace the responsibility for becoming menopause aware and creating environments that mitigate the challenges menopausal employees face
- no employee should feel forced to leave work because of a lack of organisational awareness and support.

The February '24 focus groups participants also highlighted the importance of colleagues' attitudes. For most, empathy came from those who were experiencing menopause or

had experienced it. Several participants said they had taken it upon themselves to enlighten colleagues about menopause.

We talked about it informally. There's 6 of us and we are all females in our late forties/early fifties. We talk about the experience of hot flushes and brain fog. We laugh about how frequently we each need to reach out for our fans. But we haven't really talked about possibly needing time off or the possibility of workplace changes. We just sort of, you know, carry on. (Feb.'24 COTA Australia focus group participant).

I talk about it all the time. Why should I hide away. If we want change, we need to be bold and courageous. I'm happy to contribute to breaking the ignorance and silence around menopause and perimenopause. Our mothers and grandmothers rarely talked about what they were going through – not even to their daughters. I want to make certain the workplace is fully onboard with supporting people going through menopause before it happens for my daughters. I want their experience is to be totally different from mine.

Suggestions for making workplaces more menopause aware and sensitive

Gendered ageism must be addressed with specific actions taken to eliminate discriminatory attitudes and practices.

COTA Australia has advocated for employers to become inclusive and diverse workplaces which welcome and support older workers. In addition to this, employers need to collaborate with female staff to address the menopause challenges they encounter in workplaces. This is important as it means employers can meet their work health and safety responsibility, as well as the economic imperative retain experienced staff. By providing appropriate environmental adjustments, resources and supports to employees affected by menopausal symptoms employers will have productive, engaged and motivated employees. The women we engaged with advocated that making workplaces more menopause aware and sensitive is the key to creating environments in which employees experiencing menopause symptoms *can thrive and flourish (focus group participant).*

Outlined below are several workplace changes that are the critical building blocks for workplaces becoming more inclusive and supportive environments for menopausal and perimenopausal women.

1. Awareness – building understanding and empathy at all levels

Organisations and businesses need to prioritise building whole of organisation menopause and perimenopause awareness. Enhancing employer and employee awareness of menopause and the effects symptoms can have on an individual's health and wellbeing is fundamental to the development of workplace practices and approaches that are informatively inclusive.

The biggest thing is education to raise awareness. So people actually have an understanding of what their colleague is going through. There needs to be understanding and empathy. There needs to be awareness of the symptoms and what women actually experience going through menopause. There needs to be understanding that the experience of menopause differs from person to person. We need open and honest conversations. For instance, LGBTI and mental health are now talked about openly – I think whole of organisation education would actually help to normalise it. Disintegrate the stigma. Create room for positive and open conversations in which all employees feel empowered (Feb.'24 COTA Australia focus group participant).

Focus groups engaged in animated conversations about how some organisations are 'normalising' the experience of menopause in the workplace. One participant shared how her CEO talked about how menopause was impacting on her life. The CEO also spoke openly about the need for workplace practical adjustments and policy changes so that she and other employees experiencing menopause would not be disadvantaged and/or discriminated against.

2. A focus on education and training for managers and supervisors

Managers and supervisors have a critical role to play in dismantling workplace discrimination and stigma. They are also vital to ensuring the establishment of workplace environments which optimise work performance, resilience, engagement, skill development and career opportunities for all team members. Managers and supervisors need to appreciate that these responsibilities apply just as much to team members transitioning through menopause as to others. With the context of a whole of organisation awareness program and flexible policies, managers and supervisors are fundamental to ensuring the organisational culture is experienced by individual employees as positive and supportive.

Understanding would help enormously – it would be great if managers and supervisors understood. But most need education and ongoing training to come up to speed. They have to attend courses. Like managers and supervisors have to attend to improve their understanding and competency in areas such as of occupational health, project management, supervision. (Feb.'24 COTA Australia focus group participant).

3. Flexible work practices and practical support

COTA Australia has advocated for employers to adopt workplace flexibility policies that support older workers. This needs to extend to policies and approaches that support employees experiencing menopause and perimenopause to maximise their workplace contribution. These policies and supports should be codesigned with employees and promoted throughout the workplace.

Workplaces need to be flexible. The focus needs to be outputs rather than how long you are sitting at your desk really struggling and feeling very unproductive. This hits your self-esteem. I would like to see organisations introduce menopause in leave policies and reproductive health policies. This could make a real difference – it would support women to flourish in their careers whilst going through perimenopause and menopause. (Feb.'24 COTA Australia focus group participant).

Menopause and perimenopause need to be referenced in existing categories of leave. Being mindful of the gendered superannuation gap, a critical consideration would be to ensure leave is accompanied by the provision of superannuation. We also recommend strengthened occupational health and safety policies that recognise women of menopausal age may need extra consideration. Plus, adjustments (ventilation, temperature etc.) may be necessary to support these employees maintain performance and participation.

Creating menopause sensitive environments involves a shift in organisational culture. If managers and supervisors are to make the contribution required of them, they need to be supported to develop the skill and insights to:

- engage in conversations with individual employees and teams around menopause and the various impacts of symptoms

- as with any health condition, provide short-term or longstanding, appropriate support such as discussing with individual employees how flexible workplace policies and approaches can be applied to empower them to thrive – deliver on work outcomes while maintaining their physical health and wellbeing
- work with teams to implement workplace adjustments whilst supporting all employees to be productive and engaged

4. Resources for employees experiencing menopause and perimenopause

It is important for organisations to codesign with female employees information resources which explain how they will be supported at work while experiencing menopause and perimenopause. Some of the women we engaged with also highlighted the importance of access to specialist menopause counselling and commented on the invaluable support and understanding they received from some General Practitioners.

I suffered a real confidence hit. Luckily, I had a great GP, but I shopped around for her. So that's been helpful in just validating the experience (Feb.'24 COTA Australia focus group participant).

It was suggested that access to clinicians who specialise in working with menopausal women could be provided in addition to an organisation's Employee Assistance Program (EAP).

Other suggestions for Government

- The Australian Government to commission a best practice in menopause and perimenopause support study and promote the findings through a report and social media campaign.
- Provide cost-effective access to menopausal medications, treatments and counselling – especially for people experiencing financial and/or social hardship.²²
- Fund menopause specialist clinics in public health services where women could access free counselling and other related supports.

²² It is noted that on 1 March 2024 menopause medications were included on the PBS's listing of medicines available for 60-day prescriptions. This is welcomed and likely to have a positive impact