

KICK-STARTING A CONVERSATION ON MENOPAUSE

BADN Presidential Column by **Jacqui Elsdon**, President 2019-2022



I would like to raise awareness about the importance of enabling employees who are experiencing menopausal symptoms to receive the support they need to manage their symptoms at work. If this is something you think your employer needs to consider then I would urge you to have a conversation with them about it.

We are all familiar with the term ‘the change of life’ or ‘the change’ in relation to when it is the time in a woman’s* life when menstruation stops permanently. This can happen from the age of 40 up until the age of 55, however it does vary from woman to woman.

Those of you reading this who have experienced the stages of menopause will be familiar with the physical symptoms which can include hot flushes, insomnia, fatigue, poor concentration, urinary issues, skin problems and headaches. These symptoms together with any hormone imbalance can cause women going through the menopause to experience loss of confidence, anxiety, depression, panic attacks, mood swings, irritability and memory issues. Some of these symptoms can impact upon cognitive functions eg being unable to remember things; inability to find the right word to express thoughts; having thoughts completely disappear in mid-sentence; and loss of confidence. Please note that this list of examples is not exhaustive. If that wasn’t enough to contend with, Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT), which is often prescribed for menopause, can have debilitating side effects such as nausea, headaches and leg cramps. These symptoms can continue for many years.

When you consider that women over 50 are the fastest growing segment of the workforce and the dental nurse population are dominated by the female sex, many will go through the menopause in their working lives. It is important therefore to realise the importance of providing

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support to manage their symptoms at work. It makes sense therefore to state that those employers who do support their employees through the menopause will benefit from lower sickness absence and employee turnover together with increased engagement in their work and increased loyalty towards their employer.

Employers have a responsibility under the Equality Act 2020 to make reasonable adjustments to an employee’s role or working conditions if they have a disability which puts them at a disadvantage. Although the menopause is not a disability, it can be if it has a substantial effect on a woman’s ability to complete daily activities. Under the Act therefore, menopause is covered by three protected characteristics: age, sex and disability. The Health & Safety at Work Act 1974 refers to working conditions when experiencing menopausal symptoms and Under the Employment Rights Act 1996, a dismissed employee with two years’ service can claim under unfair dismissal if discriminated against and employees who resign can claim that the behaviour of their employer caused them to resign (constructive dismissal).

Employers can support their employees in many ways. They can review the working environment to facilitate changes to ease menopausal discomfort. These could include ensuring that workwear is comfortable, bathroom facilities are easy to access, there

is access to air conditioning or a fan and access to cold drinking water. These all seem logical suggestions, I hear you cry, however having worked as a dental nurse/dental educator for a combination of 40 years, I know that *logical* does not always apply.

Have conversations with your employer to make reasonable adjustments and boost awareness at your workplace for colleagues experiencing menopausal symptoms or for yourself. It is important to also acknowledge that *Attendance and Performance at work* can be affected by menopausal symptoms and the ability to provide a sickness policy which takes into account periods of short absence and a performance policy that takes menopausal symptoms into account can provide an employee with the confidence that she is supported at work. We all have a desire to be treated with dignity and respect.

My comments have only just scratched the surface of this topic, however I hope that you may find this summary of information helpful to kick start a conversation with your employer if you feel you are not being supported in your workplace and as a colleague who is experiencing the menopause.

As a BADN member you can access our Advice Sheet and we have put together a Specimen Policy for you to adapt and use at your own workplace.

For all BADN enquiries please write to enquiries@BADN.org.uk or call 01253 338366.

*Although this information uses the term ‘woman’, please note that people from the non-binary, transgender and intersex communities may also experience menopausal symptoms.