

***View from the Chair; Business Newsletter; Tuesday 29 January 2019
by Dr Michael Wardlow, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI***

The menopause and equality issues at work

Over the past few months, the Equality Commission has been surveying employers and employees throughout Northern Ireland, hearing about what would help them ensure fair and equal treatment and good workplace relations and about what can upset or disturb the achievement of these goals. We are getting plenty of feedback to the survey, which is being collated and analysed, and we will share the outcomes from that when the process is completed.

Many of the issues coming up at Commission training sessions and in advice queries from employers are on themes which will be familiar to readers of this column. Concerns about how to deal with requests for flexible working arrangements, for example, or the need to make reasonable adjustments for people with disabilities, feature frequently.

Another issue which employers have been raising with us is what steps they should take when women employees have menopausal symptoms. The symptoms vary from woman to woman, but can include hot flushes, headaches and 'brain fog' which may affect memory or concentration. These can be serious enough to impact on the work of a woman going through the menopause and it is vital that, when this situation arises, both the employee and her manager or employer are able to discuss the situation openly and positively.

That is important, first and foremost for the welfare of the employee, and also for the benefit of the business. Menopausal symptoms can raise workplace issues around gender, age and disability, so an employer needs to consider them carefully. There are a number of basic measures which can be taken to create a working environment where potential problems can be minimised.

Having a policy which recognizes menopause as a potential equality issue within the workplace and making sure that it is included within any occupational health strategy is one important step. This can make women feel more comfortable in raising any issues surrounding the menopause. Of course, when issues are raised, they need to be dealt with, so managers have to be trained to deal effectively and empathetically with queries and put adjustments in place for staff affected.

Adjustments are often straightforward and simple measures such as placing workstations near open windows or making sure there is adequate ventilation or access to a fan, or ensuring there is cold drinking water available. What best suits any particular person's needs, of course, can only be worked out in consultation with the employee concerned.

The Equality Commission can provide advice and guidance to any employer who feels they may need support in dealing with these issues. Contact us on our enquiry line on 028 90 500 600 or online at www.equalityni.org/employers