

## **View from the Chair; Business Newsletter; 8 June 2021 Geraldine McGahey, Chief Commissioner, Equality Commission NI**

### **The Menopause – a workplace issue**

If I were to tell you that there's a health condition which can affect half the Northern Ireland workforce for four years or more, you might be worried.

The menopause is that condition and, working jointly with the Labour Relations Agency and NICICTU, we've recently issued new guidance to employers to help staff experiencing the menopause through what can be a difficult time for them. With women making up half of Northern Ireland's workforce, and 56% of women over 50 in work, employers need to consider how they can support women in the workplace when their menopause happens.

One of the difficulties with managing the menopause at work is that, while most women experience it between 45 and 55, the menopause can happen much earlier for some women. There's also a range of symptoms: some women experience them all, some not. Every woman's experience is personal and different. This does not mean that managers need to be experts in women's health, it just means that there needs to be a policy in place, and managers need training and support in how to help women, and how and when to implement it.

ICTU's 2018 survey on experiences of the menopause at work attracted the biggest response to one of its surveys in Northern Ireland – ever. More than 2,400 women responded, 60% of whom were menopausal. Half said that the menopause had been treated as a joke in their workplace, and 55% said the gender of their line manager would influence their decision whether to talk to them or not about the menopause. One woman had to provide a letter from her doctor before she could have a fan on her desk. 96% of respondents said they would welcome a workplace policy on menopause, only 1% actually have one. It's a fascinating read.

From the employer point of view, you'll already understand the importance of listening to your staff and understanding and seeking to accommodate their needs. This is the basis of running a welcoming and inclusive workplace and results in staff loyalty, less absenteeism and better motivation and productivity. You also have a duty of care to your employees under health and safety law and you need to be aware of the possibility of facing a claim of sex, disability or age discrimination – so for all these reasons, you should read the guidance and avail of the help on offer.

The new guidance contains a checklist, some case law decisions and good practice examples from Northern Ireland employers. You may not need to develop a specific

menopause policy if you have a commitment to supporting women going through menopause in other policies, for example, your equality policy, harassment policy or reasonable adjustment policy. But you do need to make it clear that if anyone needs to talk about menopause, it will be taken seriously and listened to.

The reaction of employers and HR people has shown us that there's a real appetite to learn about this, to de-stigmatise discussion of the menopause, and to change workplace practices so that women going through the menopause can be better accommodated. Again in partnership with the Labour Relations Agency and NICICTU, we have organised a training session on managing menopause in the workplace, which is now fully subscribed.

This is about more than complying with the law, though. You may find that all that's needed to help your employee through a difficult patch is a seat by the window, an extra uniform blouse, access to cold water or a fan on her desk. This is about taking the opportunity to ensure that a menopausal employee has the same opportunity to have a safe, comfortable and productive working life as her colleagues.

**Download the new guidance** (pdf format - 1.46mb)

- [Promoting Equality in Employment for Women Affected by the Menopause](#)