

Businesses urged to take action to help women going through the menopause

There were celebrations outside Parliament on Friday as the Government's pledged to improve services for women going through the menopause.

MPs and TV personalities including Davina McCall, Penny Lancaster and Mariella Frostrup were among the crowd in Parliament Square to cheer the Government's announcement that the cost of repeat prescriptions for hormone replacement therapy (HRT) for those experiencing symptoms of the menopause in England would be significantly reduced.

The victory came after a high profile campaign that has involved politicians, celebrities and members of the royal family spoke about a subject that has often been taboo.

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Now, as many companies become more attuned to the needs of their workers, businesses around the UK are being targeted to take action on the issue, following research that suggests as many as 900,000 women in the UK have quit their jobs due to the menopause, many of them after struggling to manage their symptoms at work.

Three in four women will experience menopause symptoms and one in four will have severe symptoms, such as anxiety, brain fog, poor concentration, fatigue, hot flushes and irregular and heavy bleeding, the research has shown.

Now the Menopause Workplace Pledge, in partnership with Hello! magazine and supported by Bupa, is calling on employers to commit to recognising that the menopause is an issue in the

workplace; talking openly, positively and respectfully about it; and to actively supporting employees.

PwC, HarperCollins UK, Santander UK, Tesco, Severn Trent, Aster Group, Bupa, Hello! magazine, Standard Chartered and First Direct are among the companies which have already signed up.

Obstetrician and gynaecologist Prof Dame Lesley said: "In the UK, there are nearly five million women working aged between 45-60. The majority of these women will go through the menopause, which frequently coincides with the peak of their careers, a time when they are at their most successful and productive.

"It is encouraging that many employers can and are taking steps to support employees struggling in the workplace. We hope many more will sign our pledge to ensure no woman is left behind."



A woman in a hot office
(Image: Diane Diederich)

Separate research has shown that symptoms of the menopause and a lack of support are forcing some women to take time off work and even leave their jobs.

A poll of 3,800 women in the UK found that most felt the menopause or the months and years leading up to it (known as the perimenopause) had had a huge impact on their careers.

The 12-question survey, which was presented at the Royal College of GPs' recent annual conference, found that 99% of women felt their perimenopausal or menopausal symptoms had led to a negative impact on their careers, with more than a third calling the impact significant.

Some 59% had taken time off work due to their symptoms, with 18% off more than eight weeks. Reasons for taking time off included reduced efficiency (45%), poor quality of work (26%) and poor concentration (7%).

Half of those who took at least eight weeks off work resigned or took early retirement. Overall, one in five (21%) women passed on the chance to go for a promotion they would have otherwise considered, 19% reduced their hours and 12% resigned.

But a majority (60%) of women said their workplace offered no menopause support.

The survey was led by medic Dr Louise Newson, who runs the not-for-profit Newson Health Research And Education.

She said: "For far too long menopausal women have been faced with an impossible choice: struggle on with often debilitating symptoms or leave behind careers they have worked so hard for. The average age of the menopause in the UK is 51, at precisely the point where many women are the peak of their careers with

an abundance of skills and experience to offer.

“The problem is widespread, including at the heart of healthcare. Some 77% of the NHS workforce are women and a significant number of these will be perimenopausal and menopausal. In fact, research shows that only one in 10 female GPs had discussed their symptoms with a manager.

“The issues raised in this survey show not only an urgent need to improve menopause support in the workplace but access to evidence-based menopause information and treatment to ease and improve symptoms.

“We owe this to all menopause women to help them reach their career potential.”

Earlier this month, Sophie, Countess of Wessex, spoke about the “tragic” impact menopause is having on women in the workplace. The royal, who is married to Prince Edward, has backed a new campaign by the Wellbeing of Women charity that calls on companies to ensure they are supporting employees through menopause.

The issue of the menopause has risen up the political agenda after being championed by Carolyn Harris, Labour MP for Swansea East and chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on the Menopause.

Mr Harris had tabled a Private Member’s Bill to get more support for women going through the menopause, but withdrew it following assurances from the Government, including on prescription charges.

She said: “It’s only the beginning, there’s a long way to go but we’ve made a huge step forward today for women.

“It was the right thing to do and we know that women from now on will be taken seriously and that the menopause will not be something that we’ll hide under the carpet any longer.”

Ms Harris has been asked by the Government to be co-chair of a menopause task force which aims to “encourage faster action and join up the dots across the system in order to take a coherent approach to improving support for those experiencing the menopause”.

Crucially, she said she hopes to see improved workplace laws as part of the next steps, though some companies are already getting ahead of the game.

Last week cereal giant Kellogg’s said it would offer new support to its employees experiencing the menopause – as well as pregnancy loss and fertility treatment – with managers getting training to deepen their understanding and make workplace adjustments where necessary.

Sam Thomas-Berry of Kellogg’s said: “We want to offer employees increased support for those often-taboo issues like the menopause, fertility and pregnancy loss. Many people experience these issues, and the impact can be both physical and mental, but they aren’t discussed widely in the workplace.

“That’s why we’re launching several new workplace policies for even better equity and inclusion at Kellogg’s. We want to create a culture where people feel psychologically safe so we’ll encourage colleagues to be allies to others impacted by these issues.”

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