

Menopause

WORKING THROUGH THE CHANGE: HEALTH AND SAFETY AND THE MENOPAUSE

The menopause raises health and welfare issues for hundreds of thousands of working women, but is a workplace issue ignored by most employers. A new TUC study reveals many women have jobs that could be making menopause-related symptoms worse, and calls on employers to provide better welfare facilities, rest breaks and a lot more forethought and understanding.

Working through the change, a March 2003 TUC report, says 70 per cent of women aged 45-59 across the UK are in work. Most women go through the menopause, or "the change," between 48 and 55.

The TUC report says: "With more women in the workforce, and two thirds of women in the UK between 50 and 59 in employment, more women – not just older women – are now working through and beyond the menopause. Occupational health and safety and health promotion policies will therefore be increasingly important for these women."

It is certainly not treated as an important workplace issue now. The TUC report, based on a survey of 500 workplace health and safety reps, found that only one out of five employers provided information about the menopause.

Only 2 per cent said health and safety policies covered menopause-related issues and 45 per cent said their managers didn't recognise problems associated with the menopause.

Uncivil servants

Barbara was a senior civil servant, who as she approached 50 began to have irregular and heavy periods, which were sometimes so bad that she had to go home sick. Her GP put her on HRT, but this made the bleeding worse, and she began to suffer from depression and uncharacteristic and unpredictable mood swings. Her managers told her to "pull herself together." They eventually allowed her to work for some of the week from home, but were also giving her unreasonable deadlines to meet, and implying that she wasn't pulling her weight. After four weeks sick leave, she asked to return to work part time. Her request was refused so she resigned. Barbara now has another job, where her colleagues and managers are much more sympathetic.

In fact, many women can expect flak, not help. One in three respondents to the TUC survey (31 per cent) reported management criticism of menopause-related sick leave, over a third cited embarrassment or difficulties in discussing the menopause with their employers, and one in five (19 per cent) spoke of criticism, ridicule and even harassment from their managers when the subject was broached.

TUC general secretary elect Brendan Barber said: "Despite the large number of older women in employment, the menopause is rarely seen as a workplace issue.

"There is no excuse for the silence, embarrassment, confusion and inaction around the menopause – something which all women go through. The health of women in later years depends very much on their health when they are working through the menopause and employers are not doing enough to protect them."

Hot and bothered

The TUC report says: "Work can affect women working through the menopause in various ways, especially if they cannot make healthy choices at work. Employers should consider this when carrying out and implementing health and safety risk assessments."

Respondents to the TUC survey said that the symptoms of the menopause most likely to be made worse by work were hot flushes (53 per cent), headaches (46 per cent), tiredness and a lack of energy (45 per cent).

Other symptoms likely to be made worse by work were sweating (39 per cent), anxiety attacks (33 per cent), aches and pains (30 per cent), dry skin and eyes (29 per cent), and short term memory loss (29 per cent).

Two-thirds of the safety reps (66 per cent) reported that high workplace temperatures were causing problems for menopausal women, and poor ventilation was cited by just over half (52 per cent).

Twenty-six per cent of respondents complained about poor or non-existent rest facilities, 21 per cent were compromised by poor or inaccessible toilet facilities, and 19 per cent had difficulty getting cold drinking water.

Get moving on the menopause

TUC's Working through the change report recommends that employers should:

Provide cold drinking water, easily adjustable temperature and humidity controls; encourage flexible working and reduce long hours; avoid penalising staff for taking frequent toilet breaks, provide quiet rest facilities and advice for female employees (Hazards 81).

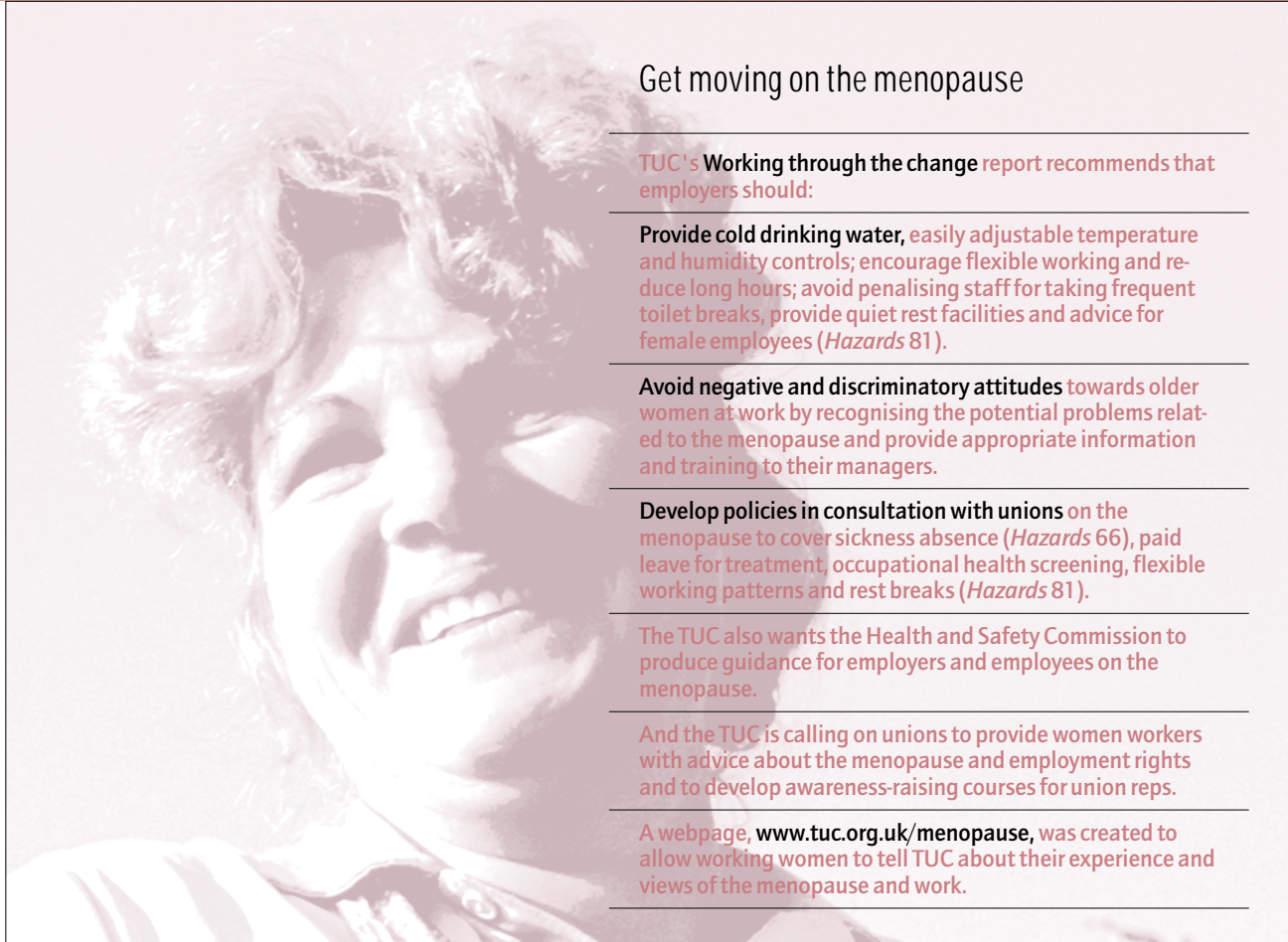
Avoid negative and discriminatory attitudes towards older women at work by recognising the potential problems related to the menopause and provide appropriate information and training to their managers.

Develop policies in consultation with unions on the menopause to cover sickness absence (Hazards 66), paid leave for treatment, occupational health screening, flexible working patterns and rest breaks (Hazards 81).

The TUC also wants the Health and Safety Commission to produce guidance for employers and employees on the menopause.

And the TUC is calling on unions to provide women workers with advice about the menopause and employment rights and to develop awareness-raising courses for union reps.

A webpage, www.tuc.org.uk/menopause, was created to allow working women to tell TUC about their experience and views of the menopause and work.



Worse at work

Job hazards could make matters much worse, the survey found. Working in stressful environments topped the list of problems exacerbating menopause-related concerns, cited by nearly half the respondents (49 per cent).

Nearly a quarter (22 per cent) cited working in fixed positions as a problem, and 21 per cent reported problems dealing with the public. Other problems cited included manual handling (18 per cent), display screen equipment (14 per cent), hot work (13 per cent) and managing or supporting others (12 per cent).

Nearly 1 in 10 reported menopause-related problems involving uniforms or compulsory clothing at work.

Working hours were also cited as problems for women working through the menopause. Time pressures topped the list, with over a third (37 per cent) reported pressure to meet deadlines as a problem. Inflexible working hours and excessive hours (both 16 per cent) and pressure to work overtime (14 per cent) were also cited.

Women working through the menopause also face problems getting the breaks they need. Problems taking toilet breaks were reported by 24 per cent, lack of rest breaks by 19 per cent, and lack of regular meal breaks by 14 per cent. One-in-eight (12 per cent) reported a lack of breaks from screen-based work.

Work and health

TUC notes that work factors can exacerbate some of the typically reported health effects of the menopause.

It says: "Working in restricted positions for long periods may cause health problems for some women. Lack of exercise and/or a sedentary lifestyle is linked to increased risks of osteo-

porosis, cancer, diabetes and cardiovascular disease in older women."

The TUC report adds that ready access to suitable washing and toilet facilities is important, as some women going through the menopause experience heavier bleeding or a greater urgency to pee, and can be vulnerable to urinary infections.

"This can be aggravated if toilet breaks are restricted or if they cannot access toilet facilities when needed," the report says.

"Employers need to consider these and other relevant issues when assessing and controlling risks to women working through the menopause."

Working through the change by Jane Paul, TUC, March 2003. Single copies are free with a large SAE from TUC, Congress House, Great Russell Street, London WC1B 3LS. Also available on the TUC website: www.tuc.org.uk/h_and_s

Hazards magazine "women and hazards" webpages, www.hazards.org/women

The health and work of older women - a neglected issue - a report by Professor Lesley Doyal for the Pennell Initiative for Women's Health in conjunction with the TUC, March 2002 (*Hazards* 78).

Working through the menopause, information and resource pack for occupational health nurses. RCN, 1999. Details from RCN, 20 Cavendish Square, London, W1G 0RN.

Taken for a ride

Sarah is a mobile library assistant in the South of England. Her biggest problem is the lack of toilets and she says there is no real commitment from her managers to improve the situation. They have even suggested that she finds suitable toilet stops in readers' homes and pubs along her route. This means that she has to control her fluid intake, which worsens her health. She has no timetabled tea breaks, and says the temperature and lack of ventilation inside the mobile vans in the summer is quite unbearable. Sarah wants her employer to take her menopause more seriously and treat her requests much more sympathetically.

