

At the time of my son's birth (November 2006), I was working for health in South Australia, employed by the state government. I enquired through my boss about the availability of paternity leave and was advised that while paternity leave was available, I could only take a maximum of 2 weeks unpaid leave.

Taking this leave was not a financial option. Although my wife also worked for health at the time, her contract had not been long enough to make her eligible for maternity leave. We simply couldn't afford to forego the second income. As most new parents know, new parenthood is a time of considerable financial pressure.

As a father, I felt that the offer of two weeks unpaid paternity leave was laughable, especially coming from a health organization that values families and runs programs to encourage active involvement from fathers. I felt that such an offer devalued my status as a parent, knowing that my female colleagues could access 12 weeks of paid leave and another 40 weeks of unpaid leave to support their decision to become a parent.

However, I shouldn't have been surprised. This was fairly typical of what was 'offered' to me as a father – the following outlines just some of my experiences during the antenatal period:

- I was rarely acknowledged during medical checks and appointments by doctors, nurses, sonographers, specialists etc. My wife would continually interrupt health professionals within the first few minutes to introduce me as her husband and the father to be, after all of these health professionals had introduced themselves to her and then waded into the consultation without even acknowledging my presence
- Antenatal classes offered very little for men. My wife was presented with a free antenatal book for mothers which was supposed to be accompanied with a parallel book for fathers. The book for fathers wasn't provided as part of the antenatal program – although every attending woman was accompanied by her partner/husband.
- While the majority of Antenatal education focused on preparation for birthing, there was some discussion about preparation for motherhood. The discussion for the fathers wasn't about fatherhood, but about supporting the mother.
- There was a constant, articulated societal and professional expectation that I was to be part of the process and be there to support my wife, however there was little practical encouragement to do so. I was often met with suspicion, and in some hospitals there weren't even the basic facilities – I once had to leave because there were no male toilets and then had to convince one of the staff that I was legitimate when I tried to get back in.
- On the first night of my son's life I was not allowed to stay with him and my wife because I was told they didn't want any trouble. I asked them what kind of trouble they were expecting but they changed the explanation to the fact that they don't actually have anywhere for the father to sleep (I would have slept in the chair to be with them).

I understand that the above points are not within the scope of paid parental leave, but they are relevant. These experiences left me cynical about society's expectation for me to be involved as a

dad, but the complete disregard for my role as a father. When it came to being offered 2 weeks of unpaid leave I really did laugh it off.

I put it to the Commission that most men would have a similar view about the availability of paternal leave. Having been sidelined by the system and then offered nothing by the system it's no wonder that most men I talk to shrug off the battle for paid paternity leave as too difficult.

However, this is in stark contrast to what most fathers say about the need for leave at the time of the birth of their children. No matter how involved and supportive you are of your pregnant wife, the antenatal period and the birthing process are only experienced vicariously, and it is the first few weeks of our infant's life when we can really get involved with our baby and establish our personal relationship with them.

Most fathers I know are not talking about how they couldn't wait to get back to work. I would have spent weeks and months at home with my new family if I could have, even though returning to work was always part of the long term plan.

Because my wife had a liver condition relating to the pregnancy, she was required to attend many medical appointments during the last stages of the pregnancy. These were all in Adelaide (about 300kms away) and so I would do as many of these trips with her as possible. This meant that by the time my son was born I had used all of my sick and carer's leave, and most of my annual leave. Fortunately I had a sympathetic boss and was able to get 7 working days leave in advance to spend with my new family.

Access to paid paternity leave in this situation would have been greatly appreciated.

The other impact for me as father was that once I returned to work, I had very little meaningful opportunity to continue to build a relationship with my son. I would leave early in the morning, and usually only got home after he was asleep. There were some weeks where I didn't even see my child until the weekend, even though I was living in the same house. This meant that my wife not only became the primary care giver, but that I became an occasional care giver. Apart from the weekends, the only reason I would see him was if he was upset, hungry, need changing and so on. I hardly saw him when he was awake, playing and interacting, because these times were usually during the day when I was at work. Often, my wife would video little things during the day so that I could at least see what she would be trying to describe to me that night.

Although these patterns changed after the first six months, my wife and I quickly became aware during the initial weeks and months that our different roles as mother and father were being defined by my work conditions, not by our ideals of parenting. When I was home we shared as much of the personal care of our son as possible, but with my wife acting as the stay at home parent a huge gap developed very quickly in terms of who got to spend quality time with our son and watch him develop during those times when we weren't all being ruled by his physical needs. We were both concerned about this, but there was no choice but for me to continue paid employment.

Again, access to paid paternity leave in this situation would have been greatly appreciated.

Further to this, I do not believe that maternity, or any other parental leave, should be the responsibility of the employer. It should be a government funded financial support, provided through the usual welfare mechanisms. As stated previously, my wife did not have access to maternity leave through her employer, which meant I had no choice not to work. If my wife had been able to access maternity leave, then my offer of two weeks unpaid paternity leave may have been accessible. Even if my wife was only offered a government maternity payment that equaled a minimum wage, this might still have made unpaid leave an option for me.

Maternity and paternity leave should not be about protecting the parent's right to have leave from and to return to work, although that is important – it should be about protecting the child's right to have its parents around learning how to be good parents without the pressure of returning to work to pay the bills.

With this principle in mind, the government should provide parental leave, to cover both maternal and paternal leave, and for that matter leave for other parents who may not be the biological father or mother. Parental leave should be offered with some leave reserved specifically for each of the parents, and the balance to be used in the best way possible to suit the family's needs – depending on how both parents decide they want to manage their return to work. This should also be offered within a timeframe post birth which might mean that a parent could stage their return to work.

It is time that we moved away from a system where the state decides who the primary carer should be by only offering substantial leave for a woman to be a mother. The state should just value and support parenting, without the gender bias, and let family's decide how their children are cared for.

Under the current arrangements, we had no choice as a family, and I had no choice as a father.

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