

To the Productivity Commission
Inquiry into Paid Maternity Leave, Paternity and Parental Leave

To whom it may concern

In response to the request for submissions to this inquiry, I submit the following:

As a Commonwealth public servant, I am entitled to 12 weeks paid maternity leave, with access to another 40 weeks of unpaid maternity leave beyond this. I have had two children, and my experience of maternity leave has been quite different with each child, because of my working circumstances, as opposed to my financial circumstances.

BABY NUMBER 1

When I was pregnant with my first baby, I was in the middle of a posting overseas and felt, for career reasons, that I needed to return to work rather than cut the posting short. With 12 weeks available to me, I knew things were going to be tight, but could never have envisaged just how tight they would be. I was required by my Commonwealth Government employer to deliver my baby in Australia (and in hindsight, given the trauma relating to the birth, I am very glad of this). I took maternity leave from 36 weeks, in order to be able to fly back to Australia on the last day a commercial carrier would allow me to travel. The weeks prior to delivery were well spent at my mother's home in Hobart catching up on all the things I had not been able to do to prepare myself for the birth whilst overseas. I met the obstetrician for the first time, jammed in some ante natal classes, stocked up on supplies I would need for myself and the baby back overseas, and took time to wind down from a high stress job and prepare mentally and physically for the birth.

At 40 weeks when the baby had not arrived, I started to worry. I had 12 weeks of maternity leave, and there were only 8 weeks left before I had to be back at work full time. At 41 weeks, my partner and I took the decision for me to have an induction - not necessary from the obstetrician's point of view, but I couldn't see how I was going to be able to prepare the baby and myself for travel, plus get back to work in time, if this baby didn't arrive NOW. I now refer to that decision as "having my baby on the Commonwealth's terms". If I had known then what I know now, and if the pressure of such a short maternity leave had not been there, I don't think it would have been a decision I needed to make, or would have made.

While there is a lot of debate about induction, there is evidence to support my own belief that the impact of my baby's induction was profound on the delivery and on my own short and long-term health. The delivery was traumatic and very prolonged. I narrowly missed a caesarean and experienced a range of issues with short and long-term health implications, including a post partum hemorrhage that required me to spend a week in hospital linked up to various tubes and to have a blood transfusion. Breastfeeding was also complicated and I required the assistance of a lactation consultant, with post hospital follow-up.

When my daughter was 2 ½ weeks old, my partner and I commenced our return to Indonesia via family in Sydney. Back home by 3 weeks, we spent precious time as a family while I learned how to pump breastmilk and set up a freezer full of expressed breastmilk. On the day I returned to work, I fed my daughter early in the morning, pumped some more, got myself dressed and got on the bus at 7am. I cried all the way to work - our daughter was just 7 weeks old. When I arrived at work, it was only to find that this was the first day of anti Australian demonstrations outside the Australian

Embassy because of East Timor. The embassy was locked down, as it then was every day for the next seven weeks, and visits by my spouse and baby were not possible.

I could never have imagined the impact return to work at this early stage was going to have on me – physically and psychologically. I am so thankful that I had a wonderfully capable and supportive partner who gave up his work to stay at home full time with our daughter. I am also glad that I persevered with breastfeeding because in so many ways I felt I missed out – on contact, on milestones (egg it was a colleague who told me at our farewell party that my daughter was cutting a tooth), on time to learn and love. Breastfeeding at least gave me the comfort that I was providing in a very tangible sense for my daughter, even though I was physically absent for long hours of the day. To exclusively breastfeed my daughter for 6 months and then onwards as recommended, I pumped several times a day initially and continued to do so for 14 months, so she weaned at 18 months. An experience I am very proud of, but not one that everyone would feel able to achieve or comfortable with if they had to make a similar choice.

BABY NUMBER 2

For the birth of my second child, I knew that in addition to the 12 weeks maternity leave, I would be able to take the unpaid maternity leave available to me. Feeling more tired with this pregnancy, I commenced my maternity leave at 34 weeks. Our son was born not breathing unassisted for 7 minutes, which required him to be observed in the neo-natal nursery and then to see a pediatrician as soon as we could get a booking several weeks later. When he was five days old, we had to return to hospital for a week because I had a post birth complication. There were other issues too, for example I considered myself a proficient breastfeeder, but this time round, breastfeeding was more complicated (probably to do with the birth and the impact on the baby and I of the large doses of antibiotics I had to take). I think it took us a good three months to make it work and for me to cope with anything more than feeding and clothing the children and myself each day. Having never been at home with the first baby, staying at home with a toddler and a newborn was certainly a big shock!

Fortunately, time was on our side this time round as we worked through the various issues. As a Commonwealth public servant, I have pretty reasonable conditions of service compared to many women. I took my maternity leave on full pay, my long service leave and recreation leave on half pay, a year of unpaid maternity leave (I misunderstood the 40 weeks allowance and asked for 52 weeks, which was agreed to) and a year of family leave without pay. All up, I was away from work until my son was 3 and a half. He then went into childcare for 3 short days a week when I returned to work part time. My daughter entered school having never required childcare.

WHAT I HAVE LEARNT

What I learnt from these two very different experiences was that I would never again want to be in a position of being under time or other pressure to get back to work after the birth of a baby. I also learnt I would never willingly “do it for the Commonwealth” again – the price the baby, the family and I paid was far too high. My experience led me to commit to working voluntarily to assist other women with the transition back into the workplace and to seeing women better supported to combine breastfeeding and work. For 5 years I have been involved with the Australian Breastfeeding Association and for much of that time, managed the association’s Breastfeeding Friendly Workplace Accreditation program (BFWA).

What I heard from other women when I was at home with my two children was “you are so lucky”. But I don’t consider myself lucky. What has happened to our society that it is now considered lucky to stay at home with our young children? What has happened to our society that we automatically assume that every mother should, will and will want to return to work by the time her baby is 12 months old? What has happened to our society that many women and men who might need and prefer to spend more time with their newborns are scrabbling to find suitable childcare and get back to work while someone else cares for their children? How are parents to experience all the joys of those early milestones and all the tribulations that will ultimately make them more experienced parents if they are channeled into early return to work, for lack of options?

What I heard through my work with the Australian Breastfeeding Association was continual stories of women doing their best to combine work and family, often in financially constrained circumstances, and finding work an obstacle to breastfeeding.

WHAT I WANT

- I want to see all Australian women able to access paid maternity leave, not just a small percentage like myself. I don’t want people to view the conditions of service that some of us can access as a privilege. Rather, I want to see employers and Government supporting parents to be at home with their families and valuing this as an activity/job that is worthy of remuneration and in the long-term interests of the nation.
- I particularly want to see maternity leave provided equitably across the social spectrum. As things stand, only about one third of women receive paid maternity leave and they are generally more educated women in higher paid jobs. That is, those who are most in need of financial assistance that paid maternity leave provides are the least likely to be receiving it.
- I want to see paid maternity leave provided for 6 months, full time, as is done in some countries, including Scandinavian countries:
 - This amount of leave would allow mothers to recuperate from the birth of their infant, to bond with their baby and spend time with them.
 - If provided flexibly in association with unpaid leave provisions (eg provision to take leave on half pay) and other flexible work arrangements such as part time and home-based work, paternity and other parental leave, it would allow families to make real choices about work and home and how they combine the two.
 - Return to work is an obstacle to breastfeeding and has implications for the health of Australian infants. Six months paid maternity leave would provide women with time to establish a successful breastfeeding relationship and would have a significant role to play in addressing declining breastfeeding rates because of early return to work. It would also sit well with the recommendations of the World Health Organisation and the National Health and Medical Research Council’s that women exclusively breastfeed their infants for at least 6 months, with ongoing breastfeeding until 2 years with complementary foods.
- I want to see fathers supported to spend time at home with their infants. The two years my partner spent at home with our first child have been invaluable. He learnt so much, bonded beautifully with his child, and is generally a more informed and better parent/ member of society (and the teaching profession) as a result. To do this, he gave up a wage with the associated impact on his superannuation and our finances. While this was a choice we were in a position to make, others are not in such a position, and we as a society are poorer if financial constraints are limiting time parents have with their infants to such a large extent.

- I want to see all adoptive parents given equal rights to maternity and paternity leave. As the sibling of an adopted child and friend of families who have adopted, I am aware of the change to the lives of all involved when an adoptive child arrives. While the process is different in some ways, in most respects it is the same – a new infant in a family that needs to spend time to bond and be together. While some employers provide equitable leave conditions, this is not standard and needs to be. In some instances, adoptive mothers choose to stimulate lactation to breastfeed their child. This process is time consuming and requires dedication on the part of the parents, which could be supported if leave provisions were equitable.

I do not offer any suggestions of how 6 months paid maternity leave can be paid for – by Government, by employers, by a combination of both, or in some other way. I know you will receive submissions from others more qualified to comment in this area. What I have offered are my own thoughts on maternity leave, based on two very different experiences, and on my voluntary work with new mothers and families.

Paid maternity leave offers choices. Paid maternity leave offered flexibly and in conjunction with other conditions offers even better choices and allows families to fit these entitlements to their circumstances. As I have said, I do not consider the fact that I received paid maternity leave lucky. Rather, I consider my employer and I mutually benefited from the arrangement, and in my particular circumstances, that I fared far better when I was able to utilise the conditions flexibly. I am a valuable member of my organisation with many years of experience. To my mind, my organisation has only done what is logical – put in place conditions of service that increase the likelihood of female staff remaining after the birth of their children, of retaining our skills and garnering our loyalty. My hope is that the Australian Government and more Australian employers will accept this logic and extend paid maternity leave provisions to all Australian women.

This Inquiry has the opportunity to make some ground-breaking recommendations to recognise the invaluable role women play in Australian workplaces and the importance of retaining skilled female employees, whilst also recognising that parenting requires flexibility, and above all, time, time that should not create financial hardship for Australian families. I wish you all the best in your work and thank you for taking the time to consider my thoughts on this very important issue.

Yours sincerely

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