



## Victorian Maternal & Child Health Coordinators Group

### **Productivity Commission submission:**

#### **Paid Maternity, Paternity and Parental Leave**

The sub committee of the Victorian State Coordinators Group are investigating ways of improving breastfeeding rates and are responding to the call for submissions into Paid Maternity, Paternity and Parental Leave.

The benefits of breastfeeding in improving the health of both mothers and babies and the future health of populations have been well documented.

1. <http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/public-health/phb/HTML2005/marchapril05html/article3p42.htm>
2. <http://www.breastfeedingtas.org/resources/BenefitsofBreastfeeding.pdf>
3. <http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/publications/synopses/files/n34.pdf>

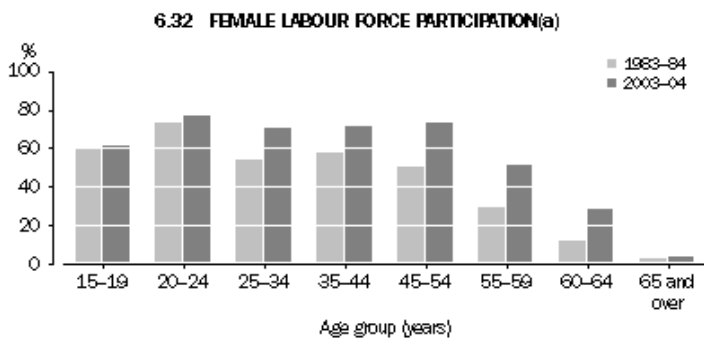
The World Health Organisation recommends: “exclusive breastfeeding for 6 months is the optimal way of feeding infants. Thereafter infants should receive complementary foods with continued breastfeeding up to 2 years of age or beyond”.

Maternal and Child Health Services (MCHS) support and care for families in the early weeks and years of a child’s life and are frontline in promoting healthy life styles that prevent chronic illness.

We will respond to the following terms of reference:

1. **Explore the extent of current employer provision of paid maternity, paternity and parental leave in Australia**

**The provisions for paid or unpaid maternity leave varies throughout Australia with some women having no access to this type of leave. The graph below illustrates that the participation rates of women in the workforce during their child bearing years, between the ages of 20-44 years, is over 60%.**



(a) Annual averages.

Source: ABS data available on request, Labour Force Survey.

In order for women to adequately care for themselves and their families access to paid and unpaid maternity leave is essential. Presently some women enjoy a level of paid maternity leave which may be part of an award or a negotiated agreement. Many women in casual or lower paid employment have no such access, making the birth of a new baby a financially stressful time.

## 2. Identify paid maternity, paternity and parental leave models that could be used in the Australian context.

For the World Health Organisations recommendation that babies are exclusively breastfed until 6 months of age to be possible then, babies are entirely dependent upon their mothers for their nutrition for 6 months. Breastfeeding takes 6 weeks to establish and then to maintain breastfeeding it is optimal that the mother be available for the baby to feed. Breastfeeding is most successful when babies demand feed and they self regulate their feeds. This ensures that breast milk supply is maintained and is one of the reasons that there is a 30% reduced risk of obesity in babies that are breastfed.

It is probably no coincidence that countries that have generous maternity leave provisions such as Norway and Sweden also have higher rates of breastfeeding. Although we are not commenting on which model may be chosen we believe it is important that the model is generous enough to encourage and support breastfeeding.

Whether there is shared cost for a provision of paid maternity leave between the employer and government the leave needs to be longer than a minimum of 14 weeks, at least 12 months duration.

## 3. Assess those models for their potential impact on:

- work/family preferences of both parents in the first two years after the child's birth:

A combination of maternity and paternity leave would encourage both parents to take responsibility for the ongoing care of an infant. The reality is that breastfeeding is best maintained by the baby directly feeding from the mother and expressing has led to reduced breast milk supply and the early cessation of breastfeeding. For a mother to continue to successfully breastfeed she needs to the caregiver taking the leave, it is a biological imperative.

- the post-birth health of the mother

Caring for a young infant can be exhausting. If you are required to work, express your breast milk and have disturbed sleep, which is normal in the first few months, the mother's health and wellbeing will suffer. The hormone involved in breastfeeding is oxytocin, it is often called the love hormone. Oxytocin when, in the presence of prolactin, directs love to nurturing and "mothering". Oxytocin also causes a reduction in stress and later stress-related diseases.

Ref; <http://www.health-e-learning.com/content/view/35/65/>

Breastfeeding enhances the attachment of mother and infant which is critical for the care of the infant but also reduces anxiety and depression in women. Returning to work and being separated from a new infant increases stress and anxiety in mothers, the increase in work load causes further distress for new mothers.

Breastfeeding also results in a lower incidence of pre menopausal cancers such as endometrial and ovarian, also a lower incidence of osteoporosis and rheumatoid arthritis.

- the development of young children, including the particular development needs of newborns in their first 2 years;

The development and health outcomes of infants and children are enhanced by being cared for in a loving relationship with optimal nutrition. Breastfeeding protects infants from a range of immediate and longer term health outcomes. One of the most important times of an infant's life is in the early years, research has shown the importance of brain development in that time and the importance of secure attachment, Babies view the world through their primary caregivers eyes, usually the mother.

Ref: <http://www.naeyc.org/ece/1997/11.asp>

Ref: <http://www.cyh.com/HealthTopics/HealthTopicDetails.aspx?p=114&np=99&id=1931>

#### Conclusion:

The economic benefits of breastfeeding have been described as gains in public health and the environment. In order to protect and enhance breastfeeding mothers need time away from the workforce for a period of time that genuinely reflects the value of breast feeding. The economic stress of raising a family is also well described. Women need the time to care for their infant while not being disadvantaged in terms of employment security and families need the support of employers and the government to achieve this through generous maternity and paternity leave provisions.