The Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF), Tasmanian Branch is very concerned by the Fairer Paid Parental Leave Bill, 2016 introduced to The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia’s, House of Representatives, to amend the Paid Parental Leave Act 2010 on 20 October 2016.

Paid parental leave (PPL) is recognised globally as providing significant benefits to mothers and babies; fathers and partners; fathers and babies; families and communities. These benefits are physical, psychological, social and economic. The Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation, Tasmanian Branch firmly believes that the current Federal Paid Parental Leave Scheme must be retained. This will ensure the health and wellbeing of all Tasmanian parents and newborns and specifically the nurses and midwives that ANMF represent.

The benefits of paid parental leave (PPL) to mothers, babies, families and communities are now well known and supported by an increasing body of international research. PPL is associated with enhanced workforce participation for women; improvement in the health of mothers particularly in relation to lower stress levels and incidence of post natal depression, and better health for babies primarily due to extended breastfeeding. PPL is also known to contribute to increased gender equity and better work-life balance.¹ ² ³

It is disturbing that two hundred million children globally are at risk of not reaching their full physical, social and mental potential due to factors negatively effecting their early childhood development, including not being breastfed.⁴ The ANMF are worried that children in Tasmania may soon add to that figure if we don’t act to ensure an adequate Paid Parental Leave scheme. The evidence indicating the necessity of a Paid Parental Leave scheme allowing parents an adequate period of time to bond with their baby, and allow the opportunity to exclusively breastfeed for six months is irrefutable.

The World Health Organisation recommends a minimum of six months exclusive breastfeeding to ensure optimal health and development of the child.⁴ The Australian Breastfeeding Association⁵ along with The National Health and Medical Research Council⁶ advocate up to twelve months of breastfeeding. The evidence is also clear that breastfeeding rates decline significantly once mothers return to work⁷ and therefore their babies are not able to reap the long-term health benefits that will improve their health and wellbeing well into their adult years.

The retention of the current Paid Parental Leave Scheme while not allowing the recommended six months leave for the parent of a newborn to remain at home, does allow some time to bond with their babies and breastfeed. In some instances it can be combined with the employer funded parental leave to allow nurses and midwives the recommended six months leave at home with their newborns.

ANMF Tasmanian Branch represents over 7,500 Nurses, Midwives and care staff. With over ninety per cent of its members being female, the impact of access or lack of access to paid parental leave is well understood among ANMF members. Three ANMF members have given an overview of the impact that removal of the current Paid Parental Scheme would have on them, their children and families.
Astrid Tiefholz is a Registered Nurse, Registered Midwife and Lactation Consultant and works at the Royal Hobart Hospital. Astrid is a staunch supporter of the current Paid Parental Scheme and equally adamant that it should be retained. Through her work as a Midwife and Lactation Consultant, Astrid understands the health benefits for all when appropriate access to paid parental leave is available. Astrid believes that Nurses and Midwives should have the opportunity to care for their families the way that they do for others families, day in, day out as Nurses and Midwives.

'The attachment of a baby to its primary caregiver is profoundly important to lifelong health and psychological wellbeing. In most (I respectfully acknowledge not all) situations, this is the baby’s mother. The World Health Organisation states that the best start in life is exclusive breastfeeding for six months, with continued breastfeeding after solids are introduced. The health benefits throughout infancy and across the lifespan are considerable for both mother and baby. Mothers experience reduced incidence of breast cancer, ovarian and uterine cancer, osteoporosis, and obesity. Breastfed babies receive perfect nutrition, with reduced incidence of allergies, asthma, and ear infections; lower risk of hospitalisation. As an RN-Midwife / Lactation Consultant, I am very aware of the compelling reasons why not all women are able to breastfeed. However, I am appalled that our government would actively obstruct women from achieving six months of exclusively breastfeeding their babies.

In addition to breastfeeding, being new parents is tiring. I mean, utterly exhausting. If you’ve been there, you know what I’m talking about. With one Australian mother in seven suffering postnatal depression, anything we can do to assist new mothers getting some rest and reducing financial strain has got to be good for protecting the mental and emotional health of women and their babies. Again, we’re saving dollars by reducing hospital admissions for PND and postnatal psychosis. PPL is about maintaining women’s engagement in the workforce as they care for their children.

Mahatma Gandhi said, “The true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members.” I would suggest that this measure extends to how we treat those who care for the most vulnerable. It’s no secret that people working in the “caring professions” suffer a huge financial penalty for their career choice. The more caring the profession, the worse the wage – just ask anyone working in child care or aged care. The most caring job of them all – motherhood – is also the one that requires the longest hours and the lowest wage. As a nurse, I love my job. I work at all hours of the day and night. I do my job because I believe it is of benefit to the community. I also enjoy it. I get personal and professional satisfaction out of it. I do get a paycheque, but frankly no one goes into nursing for the money.

We don’t go into motherhood for the money either. We do it in droves because we love our children and we want to give them the best lives we can. Working mothers work damn hard at both. So why are we begrudging working mothers the time spent with their babies? God knows they do a lot of unpaid work throughout their lives. Minimum wage for 18 weeks seems a paltry sum to invest in the health of mothers and babies, and the future of the nation. Don’t let the Federal Government take the axe to PPL.'
Shelly Cassidy is a Registered Nurse who works at the Launceston General Hospital. In addition to her job as a Registered Nurse, Shelly is a mother of three children; Ruby, Jasper and Violet. Shelly has experienced parental leave prior to the current Federal Governments Paid Parental Leave Scheme with her first child Ruby, and has since had two more children since its implementation. Shelly firmly believes that the current scheme is far superior.

When Shelly had her first child Ruby, the current Federal Governments Paid Parental Scheme had not yet been implemented. Shelly says that her experience following the birth of Ruby and feeling pressured to return to work had a significant negative impact on her, her baby and husband.

“When I returned to work after Ruby, I was quite anxious at leaving her to return to work while still so young and dependant, which at times made it difficult to focus solely on my job.

Ruby refused to take a bottle and I was very fortunate that my husband was a shift worker and worked night shift. He was able to bring Ruby into me at work so that I could continue to breastfeed as I wasn’t ready to give up.

I really felt that I missed out on that time with my new baby returning to work so early; I felt that I had missed out on important developmental milestones and generally bonding with my child.
However, with my subsequent children Jasper and Violet, it was a vastly different experience. I was able to access the Federal Governments Paid Parental Leave Scheme which enabled me to have longer at home.

When I returned to work after Jasper and Violet, I was ready. I felt that they also were more independent and I could therefore focus and concentrate solely on my work when I was there, which would have to have increased my productivity and efficiency.

Shelly is a Registered Nurse – Pictured with (left to right) Jasper, Violet and Ruby.

Alice Holloway is a Registered Nurse who works at the Launceston General Hospital. In addition to her job as a Registered Nurse, Alice is a mother of two children; Henry and Matilda. Alice has been able to access the current Federal Governments Paid Parental Scheme after having both children and believes that without it, especially with her first child she would have been in a diabolical financial situation despite her and her husband working.

‘My first pregnancy was a wonderful surprise, however at the time my now husband and I were not married and we were also not living together. We were completely unprepared for parenthood and also unprepared in a financial sense too. It was a hugely stressful time preparing to become new parents in amongst moving house, moving in together and myself at the time working in a remote community and relocating jobs.
With my first child Henry, if I hadn’t received the Federal Governments Paid Parental Leave Scheme I would have had to return to work when Henry was 3 months old due to our financial commitments. This is completely inadequate to develop a strong emotional connection and bond with your baby and as a new family.

Once I returned to work after having Matilda, I wanted to continue to breastfeed but as soon I returned to work Matilda refused to continue to breastfeed. This was really upsetting for me and I still feel that my connection with Matilda changed as a result of my return to work.

As a Registered Nurse working unsociable hours the time that you have on parental leave is the only time that you have together as a proper family where you can have dinner together and develop those emotional ties and bond. Once you return working shift work as a Nurse you don’t have those opportunities.

You constantly carry this guilt that while you are caring for others, you’re missing those times with your own children and family. If the paid parental leave scheme was removed it would be a diabolical situation for nurses, midwives and their families.

References


