



## **CASE STUDY:**

# **Developing and Implementing a Workplace Menopause Policy**

Report prepared and written by Dr Rachel Bush

## **Acknowledgment of Country**

WHISE acknowledges Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and recognises the continuing connection to lands, waters and communities. We pay our respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures; and to Elders past and present.

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## Who are we?

Women's Health in the South East (WHISE) is the regional women's health service for the Southern Metropolitan Region. WHISE is a not-for-profit organisation that focuses on empowering women.

We work to improve the health and wellbeing of women in our region by providing health information and education to governments, organisations, education providers, and community groups.

Our team of health promotion professionals work to promote gender equality, sexual and reproductive health, mental health and wellbeing and the prevention of violence against women

# The problem

Perimenopause and menopause affect all women or people assigned female at birth. Australia's female population is ageing, with the proportion of women of working age, and in older age groups, growing. This means larger numbers of women are likely to be affected by perimenopause and menopause.

Perimenopause and menopause are associated with symptoms ranging in type, severity and duration, with the average length of symptoms being about seven years but for some, it can last up to 14 years.<sup>1</sup> Around three in five people undergoing menopause will experience mild symptoms, one in five will have no symptoms, and one in five will experience severe symptoms which can continue into their later years.<sup>2</sup> Some of the most common symptoms include hot flashes, night sweats, vaginal dryness, aches and pains, sleep disturbance which leads to daytime fatigue, difficulty concentrating, weight changes, and mental health changes including depressive moods, anxiety and irritability.

Perimenopause and menopause can have a significant impact on women's health outcomes. Research indicates that post-menopausal women have an increased risk of osteoporosis and fractures, heart attack and heart disease, and high blood pressure.<sup>3,4</sup>

Experiences and symptoms of perimenopause and menopause can affect a person's life in a range of ways, including their experiences in the workplace. A 2021 study<sup>5</sup> found that 83% of women experiencing menopause were negatively affected at work. For almost half of all respondents (45%) in this study, experiences of severe menopausal symptoms led to women considering retirement or taking a break from work. Of those, 72% did not go through with this plan due to financial reasons. Only 3% felt that they had received excellent support from their workplace, while 60% said it was poor or below average.

Addressing menopause in the workplace can benefit both the organisation and employees with menopausal symptoms affecting their work. According to the Australasian Menopause Society,<sup>6</sup> collaborating with employees and including menopausal health in workplace policies can support an inclusive organisational culture and avoid discrimination against employees with menopausal symptoms.

Few Australian workplaces include menopausal health in their policies. Introducing a policy that is not applicable to all employees can seem challenging. WHISE therefore developed this case study to demonstrate workplaces that have successfully implemented a menopause policy. Future Super and Modibodi agreed to separate interviews to discuss their workplace policies that support people experiencing symptoms of menopause, including the factors

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<sup>1</sup> National Institute on Aging, 2021 *What is menopause?*. Available at: <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/what-menopause> (Accessed 12 May 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Jean Hailes for Women's Health, 2019 *How long does menopause last? Ask Dr Jean*. Available at: <https://www.jeanhailes.org.au/news/how-long-does-menopause-last-ask-dr-jean> (Accessed 12 May 2023).

<sup>3</sup> NHS Inform, 2023 *After the menopause*. Available at: <https://www.nhsinform.scot/healthy-living/womens-health/later-years-around-50-years-and-over/menopause-and-post-menopause-health/after-the-menopause> (Accessed 12 May 2023).

<sup>4</sup> Mayo Clinic, 2022 *Menopause and high blood pressure: What's the connection?*. Available at : <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/high-blood-pressure/expert-answers/menopause-and-high-blood-pressure/faq-20058406#:~:text=Changes%20in%20hormones%20during%20menopause,lead%20to%20higher%20blood%20pressure.> (Accessed 12 May 2023).

<sup>5</sup> Circle In, 2021 *Driving the change: Menopause and the workplace*. Available at: <https://circlein.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Circle-In-Menopause-and-the-workplace.pdf> (Accessed 9 May 2023).

<sup>6</sup> Australasian Menopause Society, 2017 *Menopause and the workplace*. Available at: [https://www.menopause.org.au/images/stories/infosheets/docs/AMS\\_Menopause\\_and\\_the\\_workplace\\_sheet.pdf](https://www.menopause.org.au/images/stories/infosheets/docs/AMS_Menopause_and_the_workplace_sheet.pdf) (Accessed 9 May 2023).

that enabled them to develop and implement their policy and the external challenges they faced in promoting the policy. They also provide advice for mitigating resistance and backlash.

## The workplaces

### Future Super

Future Super is an “impact focused superannuation fund.” This means that they do not invest in fossil fuels or “things that we consider harmful, for example, gambling, tobacco, anything that invests in weapons.” They invest responsibly and sustainably in clean energy projects and other positive projects such as social housing.

Future Super’s website states its team is defined by diversity and inclusion, and their practices and policies certainly reflect this. Their recruitment process is “de-deidentified and it finds opportunities to reduce the risk of unconscious bias throughout the process.” As a result, the Future Super workforce has “a huge number of people who self-report as culturally diverse.”

To support the diversity of their team, Future Super has different employee resource groups to hold Management accountable and make sure policies and practices are inclusive. For example, Super Global represents people who are culturally diverse; Super Genders represents women, trans men, trans women and other marginalised genders; and Super Pride represents people who identify as LGBTQIA.

The interviewee shared her personal experience working at Future Super saying,

*Being a person of colour myself and being a woman, it's just been from the moment I've walked in, I felt really supported. And also, just to see diverse faces and women in leadership positions...it just gives you so much confidence.*

Future Super recognises and supports the diversity of its workforce through a range of unique policies and leave offerings. For example, they offer mental health leave, climate emergency leave, parental leave (which has been increased from 14 weeks to 20 weeks), pre-adoption pre-foster pre surrogacy leave, miscarriage leave, still birth leave, neonatal death leave, kinship leave, gender affirmation leave, and cultural leave. Their inclusive policies include an inclusive language policy, an anti-racism policy, and ethical and local supplier guidelines to ensure they are interrogating the supply chain and supporting First Nations businesses, small businesses, and women-led businesses.

Future Super also conducts an annual remuneration review to “cap our highest salary to our lowest salary at five to one.” This means that the highest earning employee (i.e., the CEO) will not earn more than five times the lowest earning employee. Employees who earn under \$120k receive an additional 1% superannuation and a larger working from home allowance. Furthermore, employees who are on parental leave receive up to a year of superannuation payments.

### Modibodi

Modibodi is a “reusable period care brand” which originally focused on reusable period underwear for women. It has since expanded to include incontinence, maternity, teen, perspiration and swimwear ranges. A line of underwear has also been introduced for men as well as a baby/nappy range.

Modibodi also has a “huge program on donation” called Give a Pair. Through this program, people can donate \$5 or more to contribute towards a bundle pack of five pairs of Modibodi underwear that will be delivered to those who need them most, both locally and overseas. Through this program, Modibodi works with “a lot of not for profits on trying to break barriers and taboos and help advocate to government for better infrastructure and accessibility.” This includes not only reusable but “all period care for all people and we do that in developing and developed countries.”

Like other reusable period care brands, Modibodi applies an inclusive lens to their range of products. Their underwear is sold in sizes ranging from XS to 6XL and they are modelled by women of different body shapes and races, with a mix of abled and disabled bodies. They are also working to “break down those stereotypes of the very traditional feminine hygiene space. That [idea of periods] being dirty and you know, we shouldn't talk about it.”

## The menopause policy

### What the policy includes

Future Super's policy covers menstrual and menopause leave. The policy, which is attached in [Appendix A](#), provides employees with three benefits. First, employees are offered the option to work from home. Second, employees who opt to remain in the workplace, are able to work “under circumstances which encourage the comfort of the employee e.g., resting in a quiet area.” The third benefit offers employees up to six days of accrued paid leave every financial year if they are unable to work due to menstrual or menopause symptoms. People are “not limited to taking it in one day...you can take two hours or four hours or six hours or whatever it is. So that you [practice] self-care and take the time as needed to look after yourself.” While Future Super is a “remote first organisation” that provides flexible work arrangements, this leave provides an opportunity to take paid leave without trying to make up the hours at a later date.

Modibodi's policy covers menstrual, menopause and miscarriage leave and outlines two benefits that employees can access. First, it offers employees the flexibility to work from home if they are “unable to attend the office due to discomfort, poor physical or mental health caused by menstruation, menopause, miscarriage.” This benefit not only enables staff to work from home but to also control the conditions of their work. For instance, “they might just actually not want to have calls, they might just want to sit and not talk to anyone.” Second, full-time employees can use up to 10 days of accrued paid leave per year if they are experiencing “discomfort or poor physical or mental health caused by menstruation, menopause, miscarriage.”

The leave benefits offered by Future Super and Modibodi are in addition to paid personal leave.

### Why the policy was developed

Each quarter, Future Super asks employees how likely they are to recommend Future Super as a place to work to “measure engagement and overall happiness from the team.” Responses produce an Employee Net Promotor Score (ENPS) which, for Future Super, is usually high.

The ENPS is analysed for different groups to determine if there are, for example, gender differences in engagement and happiness. One of the gender analyses found a large difference between men and women (noting there were no non-binary employees at the time) as “men were sitting at 86 and women were sitting at 38.” In response, a focus group was run with the Super Genders group to find out what was and was not working for people of different genders and to discuss ways that Future Super could improve their experience. One of the ideas was to

offer menstrual leave. Employees were previously using personal leave which was a problem because menstrual pain and menopausal symptoms are not an illness.

At Modibodi, it was recognised that some people “have very heavy periods or endometriosis which can be quite crippling.” Previously, these employees might have opted to take time off and would have used “normal leave.” This policy was therefore introduced so employees can access “some additional leave specifically for this...it really gives that security to those who really do have quite strong symptoms.” The decision was made to include menstruation, menopause and miscarriage as Modibodi is a “90 something percent female business of childbearing ages.” Covering these three events was important to Modibodi because “your body goes through those different times in your life” so they wanted a policy that would address them all.

## How the policy was developed

Future Super’s Chief People Officer (CPO) identified the suggestion to offer menstrual leave and asked the interviewee to look into it. After conducting research both within Australia and overseas to find out which private businesses already offered a similar policy, the interviewee said, “I was actually really surprised that not more companies had like such a policy.”

A policy was drafted using a template from the [Victorian Women’s Trust](#). It was suggested that they offer up to six days of paid leave so that it aligns with their mental health policy. Furthermore, the leave benefit is “for anyone because we didn’t want to make an assumption as to whether someone menstruates based on the gender they self-report.”

The CEO reviewed the findings and the drafted policy before expressing support for the idea of offering menstrual and menopause leave to Future Super employees.

## Implementation and promotion of the policy

Future Super’s policy was launched in 2021. The interviewee announced the new menstrual and menopausal policy at the company-wide meeting with a presentation that talked about “how it came about, the purpose of it, and the leave offering itself.” The reactions from her colleagues “was wild. It was people just sending in so much love and people were so proud and stoked.”

The policy was also promoted via Future Super’s LinkedIn account. The post “got a bit of attention, and then it kind of just picked up a lot of momentum from news sites.”

At Future Super, it is difficult to determine the uptake of this leave for menopausal symptoms as currently, anyone who accesses this leave could be experiencing menstrual or menopausal symptoms. Though it does not seem as though people would feel hesitant or concerned about accessing this benefit due to the progressive and supportive workplace culture at Future Super. That is, firm support has been demonstrated from the top (the CEO) and team members have also echoed their support of this policy.

Modibodi also launched their policy in 2021. The interviewee explained that it was not in place when Modibodi was established in 2011 because there were only 20-30 employees with “majority women. We had, like, two men.” If employees needed to take time off, “it would have just been probably taken as some other leave,” or people would opt to work from home. However, it was not tracked as menstrual or menopause leave.



Similar to Future Super, it is unclear whether employees have accessed this leave benefit for menstrual or menopause discomfort or due to miscarriage. Nonetheless, in a year, “about 22 days, it’s about 6.9% days taken out of our workforce.” In terms of the number of employees who have taken leave, the interviewee commented that “it’s actually quite a small percentage as few people probably have...those more severe symptoms.” That is, employees who experience mild menstrual symptoms typically work flexibly from home and do not require leave.

## **Factors that supported the development and implementation of the policy**

Future Super found that having a supportive CEO and team were integral to the introduction and acceptance of the menstrual and menopause policy. Future Super focus their “intention and energy into ensuring our policies and our processes and the benefits we have don’t serve to create inequality within the broader team or exacerbate any existing inequalities.”

The broader Future Super team was also discussed as being instrumental as they “bring feedback and really let us know what they [want].” Having an “open, transparent workplace” means they are “able to suit the diverse needs of our team.”

Modibodi similarly discussed the importance of having a supportive CEO who drives change to benefit employees as “you do need that leadership team to definitely [get behind] it.” Though, the interviewee clarified that the story is a bit different at Modibodi as their CEO founded the business with a vision to develop “sustainable, reusable absorbent apparel” that is not only better for the environment, but more comfortable and convenient for women. The CEO was therefore already motivated to support women’s sexual and reproductive health needs.

Future Super and Modibodi have both demonstrated the importance having leadership that support and drive the implementation of the policy. Furthermore, having a positive workplace culture that encourages transparency and supports the health and wellbeing of others is also key to successfully introducing and implementing a policy such as this.

## **Barriers to the development and implementation of the policy**

When asked if there were any barriers or challenges faced during the development and implementation of the menstrual and menopause policy, the Future Super interviewee said, “Not really. To be honest, we’re really progressive.”

While there were no barriers faced internally at Future Super, the media attention was cited as an external barrier. Different media sites were “viewing it as a woke policy” which diminished the importance of it and falsified the reason for developing the policy. That is, Future Super were not trying to be “woke” or garner positive public opinion, they were responding to a request from female employees to support their wellbeing and improve their experience in the workplace.

The interviewee acknowledged common challenges that are faced by other organisations. For instance, the main challenge that has been cited is “to make sure that the men are on board as well” as it has been difficult to introduce a menopause policy in male-dominated workplaces. However, it was suggested that even though this benefit does not apply to everyone, it can still support the team by opening up conversations.

*It's really opened up conversations around other ways that we can support the team and I think it's given the team the ability, or maybe they feel like they have even more of a voice to talk about their needs and making recommendations.*

If an organisation is having difficulty with introducing a menopause policy, the interviewee recommended talking to the team to “find out what do people really want from their workplace.” If people want increased wellbeing and/or more work life balance, for example, then “you might not sell it as menstrual [and menopause] leave.” Instead, it might be included under a policy that targets wellbeing.

*I think that's how you can really angle policies like this. Angling it towards wellbeing rather than just menstrual [and menopause] leave because when people say, “Oh, this is contributing to our overall culture and how we approach wellbeing,” then I feel like that's an easier angle to start implementing policies like this and it doesn't feel like this really big scary thing that is not fair.*

At Modibodi, there were no barriers or challenges to developing and implementing their policy. The interviewee commented,

*It's not a big step for us. We've got it and we're so proud of it, but at the same time, it's a much bigger step if you're not in the feminine hygiene space.*

Being an almost entirely female workforce meant that Modibodi “knew the subject well.” There were no concerns about the proportion of employees who would access paid leave because “we understand how it works.” Meaning, they understood that flexible working arrangements would be adequate for the majority of people and that only a small proportion of people would require formal leave.

The interviewee acknowledged that this might be a concern for other workplaces who would need to do “some costings and some modelling of, you know, if everyone took [leave], what would that be.” She therefore wanted to communicate to them that “for most people, they actually do not really feel the need to take [leave] but it gives them a great sense of confidence and support.” Offering this benefit will not be a large financial burden for an employer but it will clearly stipulate the available options for employees who require flexible work arrangements and provide confidence and support to those who “might actually need those few additional days of leave” due to chronic symptoms.

## **Improvements or changes**

Future Super discussed a desire to track menstrual and menopause leave separately. While the policy and benefits apply to both conditions, they would like to track whether employees are accessing leave for menstrual symptoms or menopause symptoms.

Modibodi raised the importance of continued education about menstruation, menopause, and miscarriage. The interviewee felt it could be useful to have an “education pack around destigmatising and what is actually happening.” While they received training on, for example, menstruation and what happens in the body, “these are our kind of topics [and the training went] a little bit deeper into why we talk about them and this is how it fits into the policy.” However, the interviewee discussed a need to offer follow-up training or to provide employees with “access to information and some sort of good general level.”

## Key achievements of the policy

A notable achievement of the menstrual and menopause policy at Future Super has been “normalising conversations about women's bodies and people's wellbeing in general and just encouraging our team to feel comfortable and safe to be able to speak about their wellbeing and encourage vulnerability in the workplace.” As an example, the interviewee spoke about a male colleague who created a “bloody period pad emoji” so people can use it to set their status on Slack (their internal communication platform). She said, “now it's to the point where people, if they're taking menstrual leave, they'll just put their little status as that emoji.” People also feel comfortable to openly mention in meetings that they will be taking menstrual leave for the rest of the afternoon or that they are experiencing hot flashes.

Modibodi similarly spoke about “bigger systemic change around communication and conversations” relating to menstruation and menopause. In addition to normalising these topics, the interviewee noted that the increased conversations have led to more empathy and understanding of others. That is, knowing that someone is having a difficult time with menstruation or menopause symptoms, or experiencing distress following miscarriage, has led to,

*Understanding a bit more that people sometimes come to work, but there's different stuff going on for them. And they're a little bit more empathetic. You know, we've got deadlines, but sometimes we need a little bit more empathy on certain days.*

Another significant achievement at Future Super was winning Australian Financial Review's best place to work in the category of finance in 2022. Their win was attributed to their workplace policy which demonstrated that they are a people-focused workplace.

## Reflections from the interviews

Future Super and Modibodi have demonstrated how a menstrual and menopause policy can be developed and implemented as well as the positive impacts of such a policy. Some interesting points are worth reflecting on.

### **Ongoing invisibility of perimenopause and menopause**

Both interviews focused almost entirely on menstrual leave with little discussion of menopause leave. While one of the interviewees revealed that she is experiencing perimenopause, both interviewees primarily discussed menstrual symptoms and the different leave benefits that might be best suited to different experiences. This potentially highlights the ongoing taboo and stigma attached to perimenopause/menopause and/or limited understanding of these topics. It might also reflect the conversations in the workplace amongst people who are accessing these leave benefits. That is, people who are experiencing menstrual symptoms are more likely to be younger, and to feel comfortable to openly discuss their pain and share that they are taking menstrual leave. However, people experiencing menopause symptoms may have been socialised to not discuss these topics in a workplace environment and may therefore be more likely to “suffer in silence” rather than access leave benefits. Indeed, Modibodi mentioned that “we don't talk about [menopause] as much because we are a younger workforce...I think that perimenopause and menopause is really important.”

### **Messaging and implementation of the policy**

Workplaces should be mindful of the messaging that is attached to the policy and its implementation. Employees should be encouraged to access their leave benefit as taking leave for one day (or even a few hours) will support their physical and mental wellbeing as well as improve their productivity. Even moderate pain or discomfort can impact on a person's ability to focus or work productively. There appears to be an enduring attitude that only

people experiencing chronic pain or heavy bleeding should take leave and people experiencing moderate pain or discomfort should access flexible working options. While many people will opt to work flexibly, if workplaces implement a menstrual and menopause policy, they should encourage employees to take leave if they require it without attaching attitudes about the categories of pain that should be entitled to time off. Doing so will lead to a better workplace culture as employees will feel valued and supported.

### **Gender equality and women's wellbeing are not "progressive" issues**

The workplaces that have been included in this case study are described as being progressive. Therefore, introducing a policy with menstrual and menopause leave has not incited resistance or backlash from male employees. Yet, it is important to stop framing actions that promote and support gender equality and women's wellbeing as being "progressive" or "radical". These are basic human rights that are outlined in the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#). There are more appropriate measures of a workplace's readiness to introduce a menstrual and menopause policy that shift the conversation to more productive topics. For instance, does the workplace have an inclusive environment and culture? Do staff report a high level of satisfaction at work and is this the same across all genders? Does the workplace normalise discussion of women's sexual and reproductive health? Asking questions such as these will reveal areas that can be improved ahead of introducing a menstrual and menopause policy that will increase the gender equality of a workplace and support female employees.

# Appendix A



## Menstrual and Menopausal Leave Guidelines

### Background

For decades, menstruation and menopause have been barriers to women's equality. Future Super recognizes that menstrual and menopausal experiences can be debilitating, yet as a society, we have been indoctrinated to deny its existence publicly.

Menstrual and menopause leave will now be accessible for permanent employees at Future Super who experience menstruation and menopause.

These Guidelines aim to support employees in their ability to adequately self-care during menstrual periods and menopause, without having their personal leave unduly impacted. These Guidelines also act as a commitment by Future Super that as an organisation we aim to remove the stigma and taboo surrounding menstruation and menopause and recognize its impact on women and all people that menstruate and experience menopause.

### Principles

- These Guidelines are designed to provide opportunities for restful working circumstances and self-care for employees experiencing symptoms of menstruation and menopause.
- These Guidelines are designed to be flexible depending on the employee's needs, providing for the following options:
  - The possibility of working from home;
  - The opportunity to stay in the workplace under circumstances which encourage the comfort of the employee e.g. resting in a quiet area; or
  - The possibility of taking paid leave.
- In the case of paid leave, permanent employees are entitled to a maximum of up to 6 paid days per financial year in the event of inability to perform work duties because of menstruation and menopause, and their associated symptoms.
- A medical certificate is not required.



- As with personal leave, unused menstrual and menopause leave balance will not be paid out upon an employee's departure from Future Super.

## Review details

The following history and amendments have been made to this document:

Version	Prepared by (incl. date)	Approved by (incl. date)	Changes made
1	People and Culture team, prepared by Khi Prasser, P&C Advisor & Leigh Dunlop, CPO on November 2020	Leigh Dunlop, CPO on 29 January 2021	
2	Dennis Lam, P&C Administrator on 8 February 2023	Leigh Dunlop, CPO on 20 February 2023	Formatting changed to suit current branding. Updated Menstrual and Menopausal Leave to refresh every financial year instead of calendar year

## Ownership

Leigh Dunlop, CPO

Still Have Questions?

- Any questions about the guidelines? Are you unsure about something? Do you have a suggestion? Would you like to see us explore an awesome initiative you've come across? Just speak to the People & Culture team, who own the guidelines.