

# CHANGING ATTITUDES TOWARDS 'THE CHANGE OF LIFE'

**APPROXIMATELY HALF of the UK workforce (47%) is made up of women and around 3.5 million of those are aged 50 and over. One particular issue affecting this age group, which has become somewhat of a 'taboo' subject, is the menopause, also known as 'the change of life'.**

JOANNA GURMAN

It seems employers have been slow to recognise that women of menopausal age may need special considerations. It has been seen as a private matter for many years, and, as a result, employers tend to have little or no awareness of the issues involved. This means that women often feel the need to hide their symptoms.

The menopause is an occupational health issue and part of the natural ageing process for women. A woman is said to have reached the menopause once she has not had a period for one year and generally occurs between the ages of 45 and 55. It is common for menopausal symptoms to gradually stop, usually two to five years after the symptoms start. However, some women experience symptoms for many more years.

Symptoms that menopausal women can experience include hot flushes, headaches, tiredness, anxiety attacks and increased stress levels. High temperatures, poor ventilation and a lack of access to cold

drinking water in the workplace can make all of these symptoms worse. It is therefore important for employers to be aware of their responsibilities and ensure that the conditions in the workplace do not make the symptoms of the menopause worse.

## THE RESEARCH

Earlier this year, the British Occupational Health Research Foundation (BOHRF) commissioned researchers at the University of Nottingham, led by Professor Amanda Griffiths, to investigate women's experiences of working through the menopause. The study was based on interviews with 61 menopausal women and on responses to more than 900 questionnaires.

Hugh Robertson is a trustee of BOHRF and a senior health and safety officer at the TUC. He says there was a need to undertake this piece of research to raise awareness of the subject. "We felt this would be something that could potentially help make a difference in the workplace, which is what we're always looking for at BOHRF. We don't want to undertake research for the sake of it; we want to do things that actually improve the situation in the workplace."

Professor Amanda Griffiths, author of the report, adds: "It is lack of awareness about the menopause as an occupational health issue that is the big problem for women. The majority of women in the UK work in small or medium-sized organisations where formal sources of information and support, such as occupational health or HR are rare, and line management training about health and safety issues may vary enormously. That is why this report is so important, in order to get the message across."

Many women go through the menopause perfectly well and it is important that it is not seen as a big issue for women as this

can be patronising. Some women said they experienced few symptoms, but about 80% experienced noticeable changes, and of these, 45% found their symptoms difficult to deal with. Many women use HRT to help cope and nearly three quarters of the women who had tried HRT reported that work was one of the main reasons they tried it; 91% of whom said it had helped.

Nevertheless, nearly half of the women questioned found it somewhat or fairly difficult to cope with work during the menopause. The main problems that women attributed to the menopause while at work were: poor concentration, tiredness, poor memory and low confidence. The temperature in the workplace was a big factor for the women questioned. Nearly half reported not having temperature control in their working environment and some were unable to open windows.

In many workplaces there is very little awareness of the menopause as an occupational health issue and it can be seen as a 'taboo' topic. Women are often too embarrassed to disclose their problems or fear their manager would be embarrassed if they raised the subject, particularly if the manager is younger than them, or male. A notable exception is where the managers are older men whose wives or partners have experienced the menopause. Women who took part in the research spoke appreciatively of such managers who were knowledgeable and sympathetic.

However, nearly a fifth of women thought the menopause had a negative impact on their manager's and colleagues' perceptions of their competence at work, and felt anxious about this supposed drop in performance. More than half of respondents reported that they were not able to negotiate flexible working hours or working practices as



**ADVOCATE:** Hugh Robertson believes it is important to raise awareness of the menopause.

much as they needed to in order to deal with their symptoms.

### THE SOLUTION

Employers need to recognise that women of menopausal age may need extra consideration, as changes during the menopause can affect how a woman does her work, and her relationship with her boss and colleagues. Hugh explains: "There is a lot that can be done to make it an experience which does not affect either their life or their work badly. Work can be organised to make it easier for women going through the menopause. It is also important to try and see what can be done in the workplace before women raise the issue to make it simpler. This would include flexible working and issues around ventilation. A lot can be done without pinpointing menopausal women. It is just generally good practice."

He adds: "If you have good employment practices generally, such as flexible working time, access to welfare facilities like drinking water and a reasonable policy of trusting people when they go on breaks, then work is far less likely to be a problem during the menopause."

The Health and Safety at Work Act requires employers to ensure the health, safety and welfare of their employees, and they are required to carry out risk assessments under the Management Regulations, which should include any

specific risks to menopausal women.

Issues that need to be looked at include the temperature and ventilation, so it is advisable to provide fans and ensure the windows can be opened. The assessment should also address welfare issues such as adequate toilet facilities and access to cold drinking water.

Employers should make it clear that the menopause is not an issue that people should be embarrassed about and they can help by communicating to their workforce that health-related problems, such as the menopause are 'normal'. Hugh advises:

“Work can be organised to make it easier for women going through the menopause”

"Encourage women who do have issues arising from their own personal experience of the menopause to raise them. People are more inclined to disclose their problems if they regard managers as supportive and there is a culture of openness about health issues."

It is important to have someone that menopausal women can go to for support and advice on any difficulties they are experiencing. Employers should ensure that all line managers have been trained to be aware of how the menopause can affect work,

and what adjustments may be necessary to support women who are going through the menopause.

However, some women may still feel uncomfortable talking to their line manager, especially if it's a man, so other options should be available such as a member of the HR department. Guidance on how to deal with the menopause should also be freely available in the workplace.

TUC general secretary Brendan Barber says of the study: "We welcome the research published by BOHRF. Despite the increasingly large number of older women in employment, the menopause is rarely seen as a workplace issue. There is no excuse for the silence, embarrassment, confusion and inaction around the menopause – something which all women go through. The health of women in later years depends very much on their health when they are working through the menopause, and this report shows employers and unions can work together to do much more to protect them."

Hugh hopes the research will make employers more aware of the issues but also hopes it will help women themselves feel more confident about raising the subject. "Being open about a subject and having material available in the workplace breaks down these prejudices," he says.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION VISIT:  
[WWW.BOHRF.ORG.UK](http://WWW.BOHRF.ORG.UK)**



**DON'T SUFFER IN SILENCE:** The research published by BOHRF aims to raise awareness of the menopause. It encourages women to speak up if their symptoms are affecting their work so employers can make extra considerations to help and support them.