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Unions push for new universal right to 10 days paid reproductive leave

Australian Unions are pushing the Albanese Government to introduce 10 days of paid reproductive health leave for all workers, warning that millions of Australians are currently forced to use up sick leave or go unpaid to manage serious health conditions.

Unions today submitted a proposal to the federal parliamentary inquiry into the National Employment Standards (NES), calling for a dedicated entitlement to reproductive health leave.

The NES guarantees personal and carer's leave, but does not cover reproductive health, despite the widespread impact of reproductive health issues impacting workers, couples, and families.

Under the proposal, all workers, regardless of their gender, would gain access to 10 days of paid leave to manage any health issue linked to reproduction. This includes prostate cancer screening, vasectomy recovery, IVF and fertility treatment, miscarriage, menstrual pain, menopause, and conditions such as endometriosis.

Some workers have secured paid reproductive health leave through union-negotiated collective agreements, but most Australians have no dedicated right to take time off for their reproductive health needs. As a result, workers either use personal leave or go unpaid to manage routine and serious health issues.

Fertility issues affect one in six Australian couples. Prostate cancer affects one in every six men. Endometriosis affects one in seven women. One in every 18 babies born in Australia is conceived through IVF.

Modelling from the Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre (BCEC), based on a 12-day entitlement, estimates that employers would absorb around \$1.7 billion a year to provide paid reproductive health leave, accounting for productivity gains, higher employee retention, and reduced early retirement. By contrast, BCEC estimates that the absence of reproductive health leave costs the Australian economy more than \$21.3 billion a year through employee absences and the impact of working through pain with reduced capacity.

The Australian Institute of Superannuation Trustees estimates that menopause costs women aged 50 to 54 more than \$15 billion a year in lost earnings and superannuation.

The Queensland Government already provides 10 days of paid reproductive health leave to its public workforce, but no national standard exists.

Quotes attributable to ACTU Assistant Secretary, Liam O'Brien:

"No Australian should have to choose between their health and their pay.

"Reproductive health affects all workers, regardless of their gender. Whether you're going through IVF, attending a prostate cancer screening, or managing endometriosis, these are important health issues that should never cause financial stress.

"Early intervention saves lives. Right now, Australians are delaying screenings, pushing through pain, and working while unwell because they can't afford to run down their leave balance. This only creates more serious health problems down the track and keeps people away from work for longer. The

evidence is clear: giving people paid time off to manage their health improves long-term well-being and lifts productivity.”

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