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RECOMMENDATIONS ON PAID MATERNITY LEAVE A STEP IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

The Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA) has welcomed yesterday's recommendations on paid maternity leave from the Productivity Commission, and urges the Australian Government to implement them. Eighteen weeks of paid maternity leave marks a step in the right direction toward giving Australian women equal rights to those enjoyed overseas.

"While we believe access to eighteen weeks of paid postnatal leave (with an additional two weeks for fathers/same sex partners) marks a step in the right direction, the PHAA will be updating its policy at this year's Annual General Meeting to advocate for a minimum of twenty six weeks for mothers, capped at average weekly earnings. We will also be advocating a minimum of four weeks earnings replacement for fathers/same sex partners, also capped at average weekly earnings. In addition, we believe that paid maternity leave should include the right to breast-feed or express milk on return to paid work, which is often overlooked," explained Dr Rhonda Small, spokesperson for the PHAA's Special Interest Group on Women's Health.

"We will also be recommending that a review period of 12-24 months examines the effectiveness of the scheme's implementation," said Dr Small.

"Australia and the United States are the only countries among the OECD nations without a maternity benefit scheme, and international instruments, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and International Labour Organization (ILO) maternity protection convention 183, (1) recognise Paid Maternity Leave (PML) as a measure fulfilling the state's obligations to provide women with equal employment rights. The great majority of signatories to CEDAW, unlike Australia, provide some form of PML already," said Michael Moore, Chief Executive Officer of the PHAA.

"Women in the Australian workforce still earn less than the average male salary. Australian women have on average 1.75 babies, which is below the population replacement figure of 2.1. Women of childbearing age are also having children at older ages. This may be in order to establish a position in the workforce and greater material security, and may not reflect choice, but the concern of women to maintain their own and their family's income. In addition, studies suggest a link between return to work and cessation of breastfeeding. The World Health Organisation recommends that all babies be exclusively breastfed for six months. PML can facilitate mother-child bonding and enable sufficient time for breastfeeding to become well established," added Adjunct Professor Moore.

For further information/comment:

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