

Abreast of more than just the law, the Office of Parliamentary Counsel supports breastfeeding

The Office of Parliamentary Counsel (OPC) recently joined the ranks of Commonwealth agencies which are accredited as Breastfeeding Friendly Workplaces. OPC now provides suitable facilities for its female employees to breastfeed or express breastmilk and has developed work practices and policies to support this.

Research shows there are significant benefits when breastfeeding employees are supported. These benefits include reduced absenteeism (because babies are generally healthier), lower staff turnover, higher staff morale, increased productivity, enhanced recruitment and retention and maintenance of the skills base.



L-R Michelle Fletcher (with Celeste) and Meredith Leigh (with Angus)

Such benefits are important to a small office doing highly specialised work. OPC is responsible for drafting the Bills that become Acts of the Commonwealth Parliament. In 2009–10, about 9300 pages of legislation were drafted by OPC's 36 lawyers, who were supported by 17 corporate services staff. The work of a legislative drafter is intellectually demanding and requires the investment of many years of training. It can also be difficult to find recruits with the necessary skills and attributes to succeed at the job.

In what was once a male-dominated field, women now outnumber the men. In 2009–10, 56% of OPC's lawyers were women and 25% of these women were on maternity leave. All these women have now returned to work on a part-time basis.

Becoming accredited as a breastfeeding-friendly workplace in 2010 was a logical and timely step for this family-friendly employer. OPC provides 14 weeks of paid maternity leave. Other benefits include flexible working arrangements, options to purchase additional leave, take leave without pay or work part-time as well as access to counselling (including breastfeeding counselling) and related services.

Research shows that breastfeeding significantly benefits both mothers' and babies' health. It helps to protect mothers against breast and ovarian cancer and Type 2 diabetes. It reduces the risk of certain illnesses for babies and is important for normal brain development. The National Health and Medical Research Council and the World Health Organization support breastfeeding up to 2 years of age or beyond.

No wonder getting accredited was an easy decision for the head of OPC, the nation's First Parliamentary Counsel, Peter Quiggin PSM. 'The health and economic benefits of breastfeeding are compelling. I didn't need to think twice when approached about accrediting OPC as a breastfeeding-friendly workplace', Mr Quiggin said. 'My staff are dedicated and highly valued and it makes sense to help them achieve a better balance between work and family life'.

And the results speak for themselves. OPC has a lawyer turnover rate of just 3% and in a recent survey 100% of staff said OPC was a good place to work.

Many employers do not know what a breastfeeding employee needs to make that transition back to work from maternity leave easier. To assist employers with this, the Australian Breastfeeding Association has initiated the Breastfeeding Friendly Workplace Accreditation program in which consultants work with organisations to ensure they can support their breastfeeding employees. Accredited workplaces provide facilities, lactation breaks and/or flexible workplace practices to make sure mums can keep breastfeeding once they return to work. Why not encourage your employer to become accredited just as the OPC has and they too can reap the rewards!

Visit www.breastfeedingfriendly.com.au to find out more.



L-R Bronwyn Livermore (with Harry), Samara Zeitsch (with Patrick)