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The remains of the taboo: experiences, attitudes and knowledge about menopause in the workplace

Abstract

Objectives: This study explored experiences of, attitudes to and knowledge about menopause in the workplace among participants from the UK to assess the extent to which the menopause remains a taboo in this context.

Method: An online survey was distributed via TUC (Trades Union Congress, UK) networks and social media and was completed by 5399 respondents. Questions explored three key issues relating to menopause at work: respondents' own experiences of menopause transition; disclosure at work; and availability of information on menopause at work.

Result: The largest group (43.4%) of respondents were perimenopausal and 16.8% were post-menopausal. 12.3% indicated that they might be experiencing menopause but were not sure. Only 45.8% had disclosed their menopause status at work. Fewer than 20% were provided with information about menopause in their workplace but the majority would like such information to be available.

Conclusion: The survey findings suggest some progress has been made to raise awareness about menopause in the workplace but that substantial work remains to be done to ensure women transitioning through menopause are supported.

Keywords: attitudes, disclosure, experience, information, menopause, taboo, workplace

Introduction

Since the publication of the Government report on the effects of menopause transition on women's economic participation in the UK¹ in 2017, there has been a significant step change in public attention to menopause in the workplace. Although taking off from a noticeably low starting point, women's menopause experiences are now taken into consideration by more organisations and trade unions². This is at least in part driven by the government's (financial) need to extend working lives³. Older women are seen as an especially fruitful target as, although employment rates for women aged 50+ have been rising for years, they are still below those of men (67.5% compared to 76.2%⁴). The participation in the labour market of perimenopausal or post-menopausal women and their ability to continue working⁵ are thus crucial to the UK economy. There are additional considerations in the cost of replacing departing employees, suggested to be over £30 000⁶, and in the context of equality legislation on gender, age and disability⁷. Equally, for socially responsible employers, providing support to women transitioning through menopause should be one aspect of positive employment relationships and working conditions. As such, it is important to assess the extent to which menopause is still a taboo⁸ that women do not talk about to their line managers or colleagues. This study explored experiences of, attitudes to and knowledge about menopause in the workplace among participants, in order to provide just such an assessment.

Methods

A link to an online survey was circulated via TUC Education networks, social media, academic mailing lists and personal networks. The survey was designed to encompass a range of issues pertaining to menopause in the workplace but also to be as brief as possible to encourage completion. It consisted of 55 questions.

However, with routing, none of the respondents was asked to answer all of them.

Following compulsory participation information and consent questions, the questions covered background characteristics; employment status, work context and environment; uniforms or dress code; menopause information, guidance or policies in the workplace; knowledge, perception and experiences of menopause in general and in the workplace; individuals' own experience of menopause and how symptoms affect work; impact of workplace environment, working time and the job itself on symptoms; questions on disclosure at work; relationship to performance; and raising awareness about menopause at work.

The scale used to categorise symptoms was derived from the Menopause Rating Scale and the Greene Climacteric Scale and consisted of 20 items with an option to add additional ones that were not listed. Please see Table 1 below for the full list and how it compares to these existing scales. Our focus was on symptoms that relate directly to the workplace context. Other scales – e.g., elements of workplace environments and working time arrangements which can make symptoms worse - were based on a systematic review of the literature on menopause transitions in the workplace⁹. There were opportunities throughout and at the end of the survey to add further qualitative information.

[Table 1 about here]

The survey was open from 7 June 2018 to 26 July 2018 and was completed by 5,417 individuals. Of these respondents 0.1% did not understand the purpose of the survey or did not want their responses included in the analysis, making the valid $n = 5399$. As far as we know, this is the largest cross-organisational survey ever conducted on menopause at work. Although one larger survey-based study has been conducted, with a sample size of $n = 16\,651$, this only recruited respondents who worked at a single US financial services organisation¹⁰.

As the study is cross-sectional it has a range of limitations, including being a not necessarily representative snap-shot in time. As such we cannot be categorical about longitudinal developments relating to the extent to which menopause is still a workplace a taboo, in particular in terms of their causes and effects. However, given the size of the sample and the broad sampling frame, the results provide a strong indication of current views and perceptions about menopause in the workplace. We also have to assume that self-selection into participation in the survey resulted in a sample bias towards individuals interested in, experiencing or knowledgeable about menopause. Commensurately, the results indicate a high degree of awareness and knowledge about menopause. The overview of descriptive statistics provides insights into a range of results from the survey that combine to suggest that menopause remains a workplace taboo.

After providing background information on the characteristics of individuals completing the survey, this paper outlines three key themes from the data: respondents' own experiences of menopause at work; disclosure of menopause status at work; and the availability of information on menopause at work.

Results

Participant characteristics

By way of context in which to analyse the results, an overview of respondents' characteristics is useful. Although the majority of respondents were women (91.6%), a deliberate decision encouraged men (7.7%) to respond as menopause issues in workplaces affect colleagues and managers as well as menopausal women themselves. To our knowledge, this is the first survey to include men's knowledge about, attitudes to and experiences of menopause in the workplace. The average age at which menopause is achieved in the 'global north' is 51¹¹ and this is reflected in the age of our respondents, who were mainly in their 40s and 50s. This age group is more likely to experience or be in contact with colleagues going through menopause. The mean age of the sample is 49.6 years with respondents' ages ranging from 20 to 92. The majority of respondents identified as white (93.0%) and had children (69.9%), though these children tended to be older than 16. Whilst the largest group of respondents (47.0%) did not have caring responsibilities, significant numbers cared for children (34.8%) or another family member (21.4%). The vast majority of respondents were based in the UK but 3.5% indicated that they were based abroad, in the US, Canada, Ireland, Australia, Denmark and Germany. The

findings thus speak mainly to the UK context but are likely to hold for the 'global north'.

To contextualise work-specific questions, respondents were also asked about their employment. The majority (79.9%) worked in the public sector and were most commonly employed in Education (25.1%); Human Health and Social Work Activities (18.2%); Administrative and Support Service Activities (13.2%) or Public Administration and Defence (12.5%). The list of sectors used was taken from the UK Office for National Statistics Standard Industrial Classification. Where appropriate, we provide an indication of results by these sectors. We have thus not been able to address the relative lack of knowledge about menopause transition among manual or blue-collar working women¹². Most respondents (76.7%) worked in large organisations. As the survey was partially distributed via trade union networks, it is surprising that the majority (62.2%) were not union members. Most respondents worked full-time (66.0%) or part-time (23.9%) and did not have any line management responsibilities (67.0%). Breaking down our results by full-time versus part-time workers did not provide any noteworthy results.

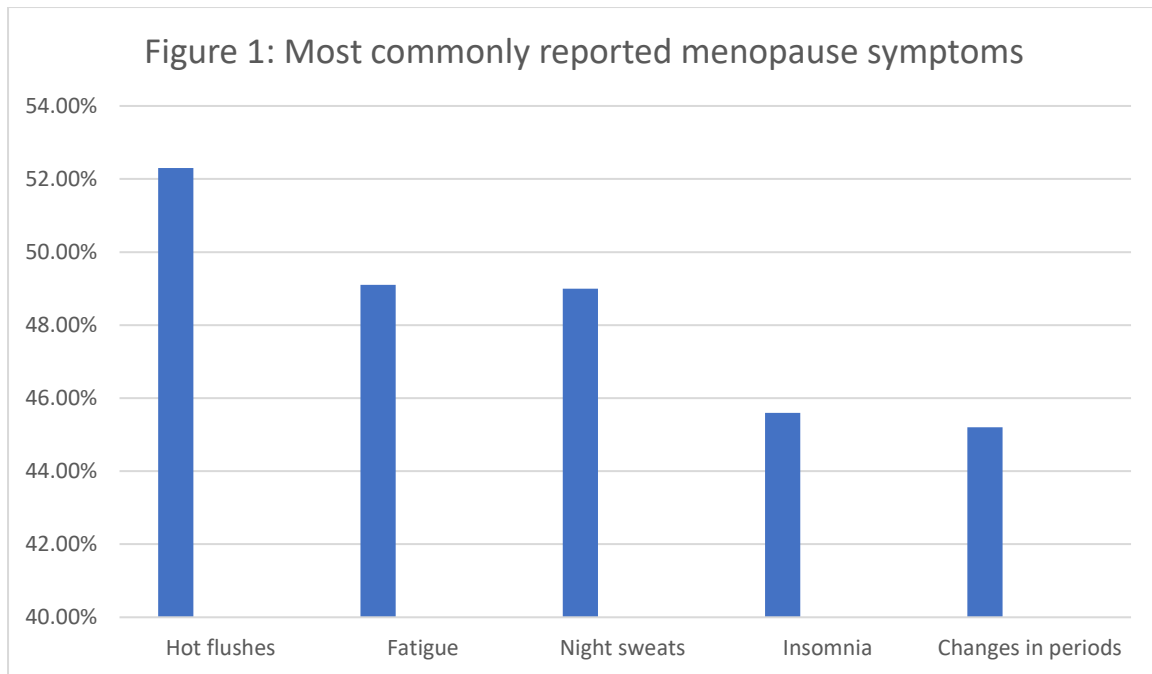
Respondents' experiences of menopause

A key section of the survey explored respondents' experiences of menopause. Respondents who had not (yet) had this experience were excluded from answering these questions. We identified respondents' menopause status by asking them to self-select from a list of possible options: have experienced menopause; am currently experiencing it; might be experiencing menopause but am not sure; will

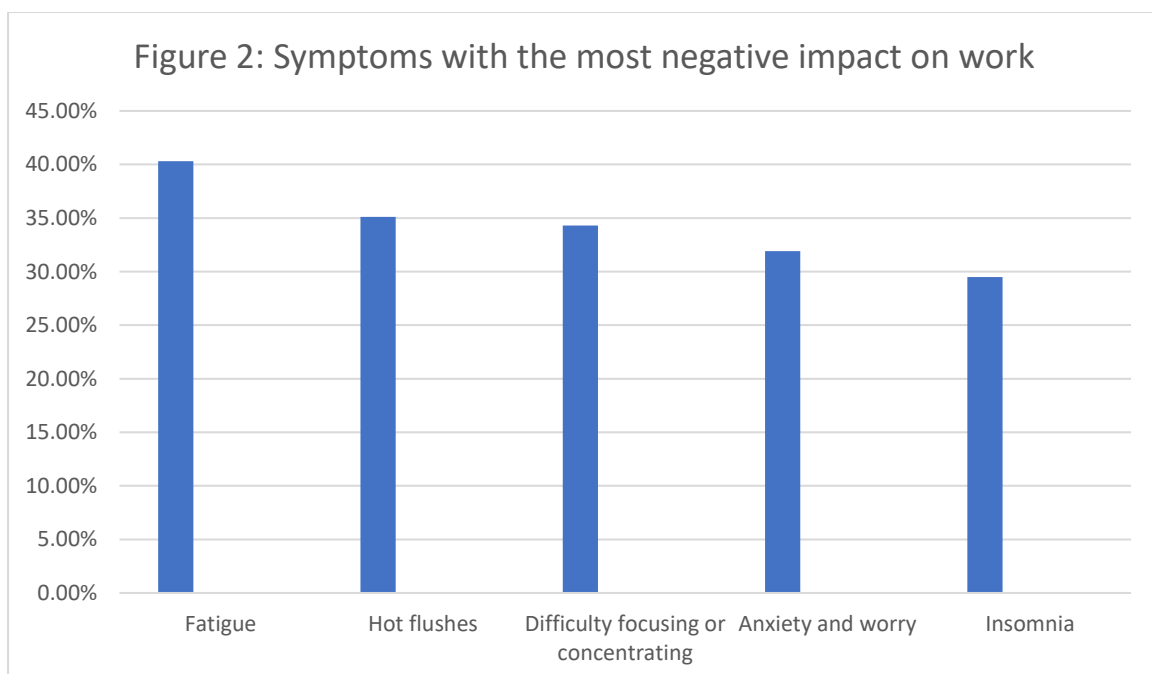
experience it in future; wife or partner is experiencing or has experienced it; member of the family or friend is experiencing or has experienced it; somebody at work is experiencing or has experienced it; and other, which included a prompt to specify. 43.4% of respondents self-identified as currently experiencing menopause (i.e. as perimenopausal). A further 16.8% had experienced it, so were post-menopausal, and 12.3% indicated that they might be experiencing menopause but were not sure. The authors' extensive experience of presenting on the topic of menopause at work suggests that women lacking knowledge about their own menopause status is common. This reflects the extent to which the subject matter remains a taboo in private, medical and wider public discourses.

Early workplace-related literature described the menopause as an 'invisible issue' with 'information and research about work and menopause hard to find'¹³. In contrast, when asked directly whether the menopause is a taboo, our sample gave a mixed response. Although the majority agreed with the statement (32.3% somewhat agree, 12.2% agree, 4.9% strongly agree), 11.8% had no strong feeling, and almost 4 in 10 disagreed (12% somewhat disagree, 17.1% disagree, and 9.7% strongly disagree). These results suggest some development towards menopause being less of a taboo, though again the exact extent of this development is hard to determine.

One reason for lack of knowledge about menopause status is the range and variety of symptoms¹⁴. Still, the symptoms that our respondents reported tally with existing knowledge of the menopause¹⁵. The five most frequently acknowledged symptoms that the 3,914 women responding to these questions reported – as depicted in Figure 1 - were hot flushes, fatigue, night sweats, insomnia and changes in periods.



Asking more specifically about symptoms that affect work most directly and negatively resulted in a slightly revised ‘top five’, as shown in Figure 2: fatigue, hot flushes, difficulty focusing or concentrating, anxiety and worry and insomnia. There were no significant differences by sector in either of these rankings.

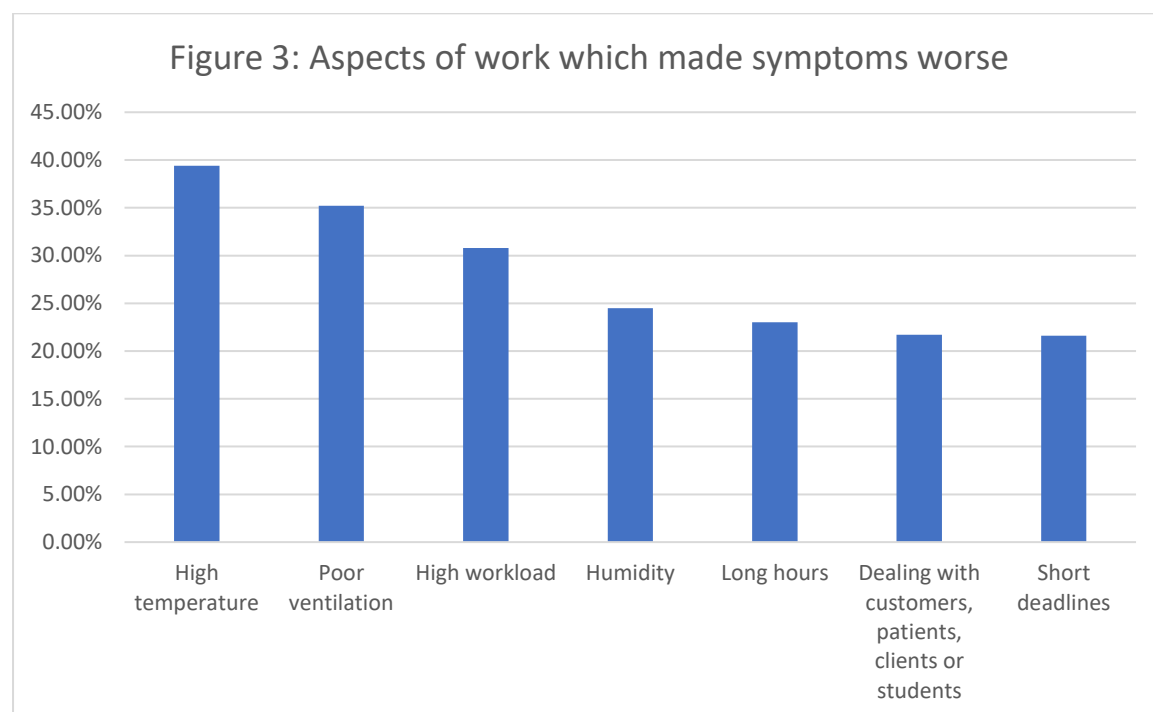


These findings are significant given that, with rare exceptions^{16 17 18 19 20},

“Studies usually focus on one symptom or symptoms which are associated with each other - like hot flushes and night sweats. Very few studies report a comprehensive list of symptoms as they affect work. This makes it difficult to summarise the overall situation.”²¹

These symptoms are also significant in light of the extent to which menopause remains a taboo, as our findings also suggest that women do not communicate about the issues they are facing. Of respondents who were experiencing or had experienced menopause, only 35.0% had seen their GP and almost as many (28.9%) had looked for information on the web or consulted books. However, 10.5% had not sought any advice. Although many women self-care very effectively throughout their menopause, there are also significant numbers of women who are left isolated or without reliable information on the menopause. Our findings on the support sought by women experiencing menopause transition raises questions about the extent to which women may feel they have to self-care versus the perceived availability of information and advice. When asked whether they had taken advice on menopause, the by far most common responses were ‘yes, I have seen a GP’ (64.4%) and ‘yes, I have looked for information on the web/ consulted books’ (48.3%), with ‘no’ as a distant third (17.6%). The fact that women might see a GP and also look for additional information suggests that they receive insufficient information and advice. Moreover, of the 59.4% of respondents whose workplace does not provide information on the menopause and the 21.8% who did not know whether such information was provided, nearly all (77.0%) indicated that they would like information on menopause provided at work.

There is also a circular relationship in this respect: not only do menopause symptoms impact on an individual's quality of working life²², her productivity and her absenteeism²³, but working conditions can also exacerbate symptoms. Findings here provide an indication of what employers could do to make reasonable adjustments for individuals experiencing menopause transition^{24 25 26}. Aspects of the workplace that made symptoms worse were dominated by high temperature, poor ventilation and humidity. Working time was less influential although more than a fifth of respondents said long hours, short deadlines or changing deadlines made their symptoms worse. High workload and dealing with customers, patients, clients or students were also reported by significant numbers of respondents as exacerbating symptoms. These findings are reported in Figure 3.



There are only some small variations in these factors by sector, e.g. noise affects those working in Human Health Activities and Social Work more than short deadlines. And of course, being able to address any of these employment and

working conditions requires knowledge about individuals' menopause status on the part of the employer or line manager²⁷.

Disclosure

Yet, overall, less than half of our respondents (45.8%) had disclosed their menopause status at work, although this differed by sector. For example, 44.2% of respondents in Human Health and Social Work Activities had disclosed, compared to 24.5% in Education. Respondents who were either in perimenopause or were post-menopausal and had not disclosed (n = 2121) were asked to identify the main reasons for this decision. They indicated that they: see menopause as a private issue that they did not want to talk about at work (19.0%); thought they would be perceived negatively if they disclosed (16.8%); or were concerned that their abilities would be questioned (15.8%). These 'top three' responses hold across sectors. The last two responses indicate that negative perceptions of and associations with menopause still dominate many workplaces and that women fear being stereotyped as old and 'past it'^{28 29 30 31 32 33}.

In light of this, it is important to consider what allowed some women to disclose their menopause status, which can be the starting point to providing support and reasonable adjustments³⁴. Most of this group (n = 1793) had disclosed to a colleague (27.6%) or to a line manager (23.9%), with 41.2% of respondents having spoken to a female who was the same age as them; 24.1% to a female younger than them; and 18.8% to a female older than them. Only 6.7% disclosed to a male younger than them, 4% to a male older than them and 5.3% to a male who was the

same age as them. These findings tally with others suggesting that women experiencing menopause transition prefer to disclose to somebody who may be in a similar position³⁵. But gender imbalances, especially within management³⁶, may make this impossible and further reduce women's willingness to disclose their menopause status.

Reactions by the person disclosed to were identified as being emotionally supportive and understanding (19.1%) and helpful (14.3%). However, 6.1% were not well informed about menopause; 4.7% did not know how to support the woman who was disclosing; and 4.7% did not offer any support. This suggests that colleagues and line managers need training to enhance their understanding of the menopause³⁷, provide them with confidence to start or engage in a conversation about the menopause and be aware of what support can be provided³⁸.

In considering how awareness about menopause issues in the workplace can be raised³⁹, questions were also asked of all participants about who should be involved in this process. There was agreement that contributions from the following were required: Occupational Health (75.7%); Human Resources (75.4%); line managers (63.6%); the women affected (60.9%); Employee Assistance Programme staff (46.9%); trade union representatives (46.7%); colleagues (42.6%); and GPs (35.6%). These findings strongly suggest that menopause in the workplace is not (just) a women's issue, and needs to become better understood and more widely considered⁴⁰.

Information provision on menopause at work

Providing information on the menopause at work is an important mechanism through which awareness can be raised and gradual change introduced^{41 42 43 44}. However, when asked whether their workplace provided any such information, only 18.8% of our respondents said yes. There is substantial variation across sectors here: from 42.9% in Public Administration and Defence and 23.5% in Administrative and Support Service Activities indicating that such information is provided, to 11.3% in Human Health and Social Work Activities and 8.2% in Education. Again, as suggested earlier, of the 81.2% of respondents who indicated that their workplace either did not provide this information or were unsure (n = 4384), the vast majority said they would like it to be available at work. This strongly suggests to employers and managers alike that the provision of basic information on the menopause, for example comparable to information on mental health or other aspects of health and safety at work⁴⁵, would not only be well-received but could potentially increase satisfaction in the workplace⁴⁶.

Equally, it suggests that any such information should be widely publicised and easy to access. Employers might also want to consider introducing menopause guidelines or policies⁴⁷. Although only 10.2% of our respondents indicated that their workplace had such guidelines or policies, this figure does point to the extent of change in this respect. In one of the earliest publications on menopause in UK workplaces⁴⁸ there were no indications that any such policies existed. It is also clear that some sectors (e.g. Public Administration and Defence where 17.8% of respondents indicated their workplace had a policy or guidelines) are more advanced than others (Administrative

and Support Service Activities: 9.4%; Education: 5.4%; Human Health and Social Work Activities: 2.6%).

Of our respondents, 39.5% indicated they had some knowledge about the menopause, 37.4% had quite a bit of knowledge and 12.4% described themselves as very knowledgeable. There is, as aforementioned, probably a self-selection effect at work here as individuals with an interest in or experience of menopause transition are more likely to have participated. There are also indications, as we suggest above, that menopause in the workplace is starting to be more recognised. Despite this, our results suggest that it is still a taboo in significant numbers of organisations⁴⁹. Most respondents (44.1%) indicated that they only talked about menopause with other women, suggesting that these are private conversations rather than normal, everyday workplace discussions. Similarly, 37% of respondents only talked about menopause with close work colleagues in private conversations. One explanation for a reluctance to talk about menopause more widely can be seen in the fact that 30.5% of respondents had experienced jokes about menopause at work, thus putting them off talking about the issue.

Discussion and recommended strategies

This survey about menopause issues in the workplace revealed significant issues, on the basis of which we offer some specific recommendations. Strikingly, a considerable proportion of respondents did not know for certain about their own menopause status, thus suggesting a widespread lack of knowledge and confidence about menopause⁵⁰. At the same time, there were statements emphasising that

menopause could be a positive experience, which draws attention to its generally negative media coverage. One example is as follows:

"Menopause is an experience that I have questioned for some time. I have always wondered if it will affect me the way [it's] socially constructed to. My mother described it as the best thing that could happen and I'm aiming for a more positive life stage too. I don't feel it has to be negative."

Our respondents also reported well established symptoms as the most common ones. Hot flushes, fatigue, night sweats, insomnia, and change in periods were the most common, although fatigue, hot flushes, difficulty focusing or concentrating, anxiety and worry, and insomnia affected work most negatively. Worryingly, considerable numbers of respondents said they did not have any support and/or had not sought any help whilst transitioning through menopause. Fewer than half of the relevant group had disclosed their menopause status at work, suggesting they may well be suffering in isolation.

There is also considerable support in our findings for the argument that menopause is not (just) a women's issue and that everybody in the workplace could be affected.

This suggests that:

- Occupational Health and Employee Assistance Programme staff can provide direct and personalised support and advice.
- Human Resources staff can consider implementing menopause guidelines or policy.

- Line managers can gain understanding about menopause and learn how to start a conversation with women experiencing transition.
- Trade union representatives can provide direct and personalised support and raise awareness.
- Colleagues can be understanding and supportive and raise awareness.

Conclusion

These findings show that whilst menopause at work has become normalised in some workplaces – in that consideration and support are available – for many, it still seems to be a taboo. There is a strong demand for information. This is important because information and awareness raising can be provided whilst also acknowledging that not everybody wants to (or should have to) disclose their menopause status at work. Good practice in the form of leaflets, videos, online information, training and support groups, as well as more formal guidelines and policies, can all help to support menopausal women in transitioning through this natural stage of life at work.

Conflict of interest: Nil

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