

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: The Open University		
Unit of Assessment: C17 Business and Management Studies		
Title of case study: Creating Menopause-Friendly Workplaces		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: April 2018-2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Professor Joanna Brewis	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Professor of People and Organizations	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: 09/04/2018 - present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: April 2018-2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>This impact case outlines the research Professor Joanna Brewis and colleagues have undertaken into the under-studied area of menopause at work. This has contributed to the removal of the workplace taboo around menopause and to making organizations more menopause-friendly, thus benefitting menopausal women workers. Numbers of working women of (post-)menopausal age have been rising in the UK since at least 1992. Most will experience menopausal symptoms: indeed a 2016 survey by ITV and Wellbeing of Women suggests 25% had considered leaving their jobs as a result. Work had exacerbated symptoms for 50%. Professor Brewis's research has had nationwide impact across all three economic sectors through dissemination (journal papers, media coverage, presentations, webinars, a toolkit and workshops), followed by implementation of recommendations in organizations including GlaxoSmithKline, the University of Salford and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>Menopause is when a woman stops having periods and can no longer get pregnant naturally. It's a normal part of ageing that usually occurs between 45 and 55 years of age, as hormone levels decline. In the UK, the average age for a woman to reach the menopause is 51. But around 1% of women experience premature menopause before 40. Most women have (post-)menopausal symptoms, which include hot flushes, night sweats, insomnia, depression, anxiety and memory and concentration problems. Symptoms can be severe and have a significant impact on their everyday activities and overall quality of life.</p> <p>The underpinning research builds on a Government Equalities Office (GEO) commissioned report entitled '<i>The impact of menopause transition on women's economic participation in the UK</i>' (2017). Professor Brewis was lead author. The report showed very clearly that menopause is still a sensitive, indeed taboo, subject in workplaces across the world. It is both misunderstood and under-studied, despite being something that 50% of the world's population experience, many of whom will be working during this phase of their lives. This can create significant challenges for mid-life women who are often reluctant to disclose their symptoms to line managers especially, fearing they will be judged accordingly. Since arriving at The Open University in April 2018, Professor Brewis and her team have worked to address the gaps in extant research identified in the GEO report, as well as promoting better understanding of menopause at work and encouraging employers to take it seriously – the basis of this impact case.</p> <p>In summer 2018 Professor Brewis and colleagues began a collaboration with Trades Union Congress (TUC) Education on a project evaluating workplaces' menopause awareness and menopause policies. The survey element of this work attracted 5,399 respondents [O5]. It is the largest survey of its type to date and helps to fill the gap in empirical research from the UK, which was only 19% of the evidence reviewed for the GEO report. It is also distinctive in capturing others' reactions (n = 1,785) to menopausal women in the workplace, which have scarcely been studied at all. Further, 189 survey respondents were based outside of the UK, making this the first study to explore how experience of and attitudes to menopause at work vary cross-nationally. The survey data suggested that, of 3,914 menopausal respondents, under half had disclosed their symptoms at work - and so had no support to ameliorate any attendant difficulties. This bolsters the case for organizational attention to menopause. Just over 10% said their organization had</p>		

some form of menopause policy or guidelines. While this represents definite progress over the last 15 years, from a baseline of no known policies, a great deal remains to be done. Additionally, fatigue was identified as the most debilitating workplace symptom: a claim more usually made for hot flushes.

Professor **Brewis** and colleagues were later commissioned by *Occupational Health at Work*, a practitioner journal, to write an article on the importance of menopause policies at work [O2]. Citing demographic, economic, legal and social responsibility cases as a basis, they established that developing policies should start with open conversations; and offered some suggestions for what these policies might contain.

Based in part on qualitative data from O5, Professor **Brewis** and colleagues also published research [O3] describing how they co-developed and launched a menopause policy at the University of Leicester in November 2017, the first in UK higher education. They found that, although this policy represents a crucial landmark, the team's academic activism perhaps allowed the business case to overshadow challenges around gendered ageism in performance management. This consolidated the team's arguments for developing menopause interventions addressing organization structure and culture alike.

The same is true of a study conducted at Sherwood Forest Hospitals Trust, for which Professor **Brewis** was Principal Investigator. This began with a baseline survey to evaluate staff's attitudes towards, experience of and knowledge about menopause in the workplace. Following the launch of the Trust's menopause guidance and programme of support in October 2018, Professor **Brewis** undertook three semi-structured interviews with the same group of women between winter 2018 and late summer 2019. The research ended with another survey to capture the same issues as survey 1, with additional questions about changes since the implementation of the guidance and programme of support [O4].

The taboo established by the GEO report also became apparent to the team themselves since they are all mid-life women. Their discussions about how they were perceived by others during the compilation of the GEO report, and how the process changed their own self-perceptions, produced a collective autoethnography [O1]. This research employed memory work – a rarely used methodology in organization studies - to explore their experiences of working on and disseminating the report. Other contributions include establishing how doing research into menopause at work across various contexts affected the team personally and professionally.

There are several other gaps of which the team have become aware since the GEO report was published. This was the basis for a co-authored paper with other menopause at work specialists [O6], arguing that researchers and HR practitioners should attend to variations in workplace adjustments which may be required by different groups of menopausal employees. Extant recommendations are based on the experiences of white, non-migrant, middle class, cis female, heterosexual, able-bodied managers or professionals reaching menopause at a typical age. The paper identifies macro-, meso- and micro-level factors which might produce these variations.

3. References to the research

- O1. Beck, V., **Brewis, J.**, and Davies, A. (2018) 'The post-re/productive: researching the menopause', *Journal of Organizational Ethnography*, 7 (3): 247–262. <https://doi.org/10.1108/joe-11-2017-0059>
- O2. Beck, V., **Brewis, J.**, Davies, A., Garlick, D., and Fish, S. (2018) '[Developing workplace menopause policies: four reasons why, and how](#)', *Occupational Health at Work*, October-November: 22-25.
- O3. Beck, V., **Brewis, J.**, and Davies, A. (2019) 'Women's experiences of menopause at work and performance management', *Organization*. Online First, published 24.10.19. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508419883386>

- O4. Brewis, J., Beck, V., and Davies, A. (2020) *Sherwood Forest Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust: Evaluation of Menopause Intervention Report*, internal report, January.**
CONFIDENTIAL
- O5. Beck, V., Brewis, J., and Davies, A. (2020) 'The remains of the taboo: experiences, attitudes and knowledge about menopause in the workplace', *Climacteric*, 23 (2): 158-164.**
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13697137.2019.1656184>
- O6. Atkinson, C., Beck, V., Davies, A., and Duberley, J. (2020) Menopause and the workplace: new directions in HRM research and HR practice. *Human Resource Management Journal*. Early View, published 29.4.20.** <https://doi.org/10.1111/1748-8583.12294>

4. Details of the impact

Research by The Open University has been heavily used and implemented nationally and internationally through Henpicked: Menopause in the Workplace, leading to impact on understanding, learning and participation, and on practitioners and the delivery of professional services and ethical practice. The research has also impacted on social welfare because it has improved menopausal staff's experience of their employment.

[Henpicked: Menopause in the Workplace](#) is a consultancy employing 17 staff. They offer a full range of professional services to help organizations in all three economic sectors develop best practice around the menopause, including workplace awareness events; training for line managers, HR and Occupational Health professionals; and communication and engagement toolkits. Since 2016 they have been collaborating with Professor **Brewis** due to her expertise in menopause in the workplace. Their work draws directly on Professor **Brewis**' research and has reached circa 1.25 million employees since Spring 2018 [C1]. An example is the University of Leicester policy [O2], which Professor **Brewis** co-authored with Henpicked staff. Others include Leicestershire County Council: here, as confirmed by Henpicked founder's testimonial [C1], training, counselling, a Yammer group and fitness classes have been introduced based on Henpicked's support. As the County Council's Learning and Development Adviser suggests, this has generated much positive feedback, like one employee saying, "*the fact that my workplace is offering all this support and guidance during the menopause is a good reason to stay*". Next, similarly, have introduced menopause training sessions, a menopause advocates group, menopause resources and a video. Their Health and Well-being Manager suggests this has all "*proved to be incredibly popular and lets our employees know we are there for them*" [C1].

Professor **Brewis** has presented at three Henpicked events, most recently a June 2020 webinar attended by 61 employers including global corporates, the NHS, government bodies and private sector companies. Henpicked's reach is still being extended: their work is gaining international momentum given ongoing discussions with, for example, the Netherlands government and an Employee Assistance Programme in the US. A September 2020 session was broadcast to 140 countries; another in October 2020 was joined by Ministry of Defence employees overseas; and a third during the same month for a UK employer which was also broadcast in the US.

Here then Henpicked's services, as informed by Professor **Brewis**'s research, have raised awareness and understanding of and improved attitudes around menopause at work amongst line managers, HR and Occupational Health professionals. This has enabled them to make more informed decisions about supporting and managing their mid-life staff, and stimulated debate in these organizations about stereotypes of menopausal women. These managers and professionals have also used Professor **Brewis**'s research in their own practice, shifting their organizational cultures to become more menopause friendly.

This Open University research has directly influenced employers in the public, private and voluntary sectors in developing best practice around menopause at work, impacting on understanding, learning and participation around menopause in these organizations.

In July 2019 Professor **Brewis** presented her research at the University of Salford after an invitation from their Athena SWAN team and Women's Voice Network. A Finance Officer who co-

coordinated and presented at the event had struggled with menopause symptoms at work, realizing *“there was no support available at my workplace at that time, so I started talking to a couple of colleagues. We agreed that the lack of support was unfair because of the impact the menopause was having on our working lives”* [C2]. After patient lobbying and persuading their Athena Swan lead to come on board, the university now has a policy. This came about due to Salford seeking permission from Leicester to use their policy as a template, at Professor **Brewis**’ suggestion. The Finance Officer says the policy *“has encouraged managers and colleagues to openly embrace how changes to working schedules and environments can be altered so to assist women with symptoms, enabling them to continue to be productive in the workplace”*. Here then a menopausal policy has been introduced in this public sector organization as a direct result of Professor **Brewis**’s research.

At Sherwood Forest Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, their former Chief Nurse was experiencing the menopause herself and knew many of her team also struggled with their symptoms at work. She felt strongly that, if the Trust did not support its workforce, this did not provide staff with the support to care for their patients. In summer 2018, she commissioned Professor **Brewis** to look at the impact that raising awareness and providing support around menopause at the Trust had on the workforce. Professor **Brewis** ran a longitudinal evaluation [O4] and wrote a report for the Trust including recommendations for improvements to this already successful initiative. As the Chief Nurse confirms in an article for Henpicked, these recommendations are being implemented at the Trust [C3]. Here then menopause guidance and support have been improved in this public sector organization as a direct result of Professor **Brewis**’s research.

In the private sector, the Finance Director for Global Categories at pharmaceutical company GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) contacted Professor **Brewis** after watching her inaugural lecture in March 2019. She had experienced challenging symptoms herself and *“felt unprotected in the workplace”* because she felt her performance was being affected. She invited Professor **Brewis** to speak at an October 2019 event at GSK House, their global headquarters. This was attended by 100 staff in person and over 200 online. GSK employs circa 3,000 staff at GSK House and 100,000 globally. The Finance Director’s efforts have seen her being invited to speak at a World Menopause Day Women’s Leadership Initiative, attracted 170 members to her menopause Workspace page in under a year and ensured GSK now has *“quite a comprehensive webpage with information around the menopause”*, enabling women to find this material much more easily. She credits Professor **Brewis** with helping to turn the tide in terms of *“normalizing the conversation”* about menopause [C4]. The October 2019 event was so well received that a virtual event ran in October 2020 to which global GSK staff were invited. This also attracted high attendance and excellent feedback. The 2019 and 2020 events were both recorded, so their reach is greater than the attendance figures suggest. Here then menopause information has been made available in this multi-national organization as a direct result of Professor **Brewis**’s research. Cultural values have begun to change around menopause at GSK on the same basis.

In the voluntary sector, the former Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Manager at the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) invited Professor **Brewis** to give an online spotlight talk for staff on World Menopause Day 2018 after an internal request for a menopause talk during their wellbeing month. The EDI Manager notes this attracted one of the biggest turnouts they have ever had and, although Professor **Brewis**’ research is academic, it is still *“very practical and useful because it is so strongly focused on the workplace”* [C5]. RSPB has shared the materials from Professor **Brewis**’s talk in an all-staff folder, which is signposted in new staff inductions, and set up a Yammer menopause café and face to face events. These have expanded to include colleagues from neighbouring organizations in the Colmore Business District in Birmingham. The RSPB were the first to hold such an event and are currently developing a virtual menopause session which has been advertised to all their 2,000 staff. Here then menopause information has been made widely available in this voluntary sector organization as a direct result of Professor **Brewis**’s research. Menopause support events have been introduced on the same basis.

Further, this research by The Open University has been widely disseminated by national policy and advisory bodies which in turn has benefitted all organizations present at the

relevant events. This has impacted on practitioners and the delivery of professional services and ethical practice as well as improving understanding, learning and participation around menopause in these organizations.

Business in the Community (BITC), a responsible business network with more than 350 organizational members from all three economic sectors, is headquartered in London. As the BITC Age Campaign Manager confirms [C6], BITC view menopause as criss-crossing several of their campaigns, including age, gender, race, health and well-being, as well as advising their employer members on supporting mid-life female staff and other colleagues in this area. Professor **Brewis** co-ran a BITC webinar in October 2019 which was attended by 84 member representatives. Pre-pandemic this was the best attendance ever at a BITC webinar [C6]. Professor **Brewis** also co-authored the most recent version of their Menopause in the Workplace Toolkit, which substantially expands on and updates the 2016 toolkit. BITC have shared this resource widely via social media and at two face to face events. It is also online [C6, C7]. Here then BITC professional guidelines have been directly informed by Professor **Brewis's** research.

TUC Education is the TUC training organization for workplace representatives and union officers. One of their objectives is to ensure greater understanding of union policies and priorities including those around equality, diversity and inclusion. Following pioneering work on menopause by trade unions and the TUC, Professor **Brewis** and colleagues collaborated with them on the aforementioned project in 2018 [O5] which also involved co-running ten training workshops for union representatives, reaching circa 125 employers. Feedback from the December 2018 London workshop, which Professor **Brewis** co-ran, showed how useful the fifteen attendees found the day and demonstrates that the workshop provided the basis for them to take initiatives back to their organizations around menopause training, policy development, awareness raising and supporting union members through performance management [C8]. The Trade Union Studies Coordinator who co-led these workshops confirms that, since they took place, *“The TUC have now incorporated menopause into their H[health] & S[safety] courses – I would think that is from the awareness raising through the workshops [as well as] the Wales TUC toolkit”*. She also confirms that some of the delegates who attended *“wrote motions to [the TUC] conference asking for their unions to act on the menopause, set up menopause groups etc.”*. Here then TUC professional training has been directly influenced by Professor **Brewis's** research.

In sum, the basis of this impact case is the promotion of better understanding of menopause at work and encouraging employers to take it seriously.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- C1.** Testimonial from Founder of Henpicked: Menopause in the Workplace (23/03/20).
- C2.** Testimonial from Finance Officer, University of Salford (31/10/19, updated 21/05/20 and 01/12/20).
- C3.** Henpicked: Menopause in the Workplace article ‘Managing menopause in NHS workplaces – showcasing best practice’ (04/01/21): <https://menopauseintheworkplace.co.uk/case-studies/managing-menopause-in-nhs-workplaces-showcasing-best-practice/>
- C4.** Testimonial from Finance Director for Global Categories, GSK (06/05/20).
- C5.** Testimonial from former Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Manager, RSPB (21/01/19, updated 28/04/20).
- C6.** Testimonial from Age Campaign Manager, BITC (23/04/20).
- C7.** Business in the Community Menopause in the Workplace Toolkit (saved in folder).
- C8.** Feedback from TUC Education workshop delegates (feedback forms completed by 11 of the 15 delegates at the Trades Union Congress (TUC) Education workshop held in London, Dec 2018).