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Bliss
for babies born
premature or sick

Bliss campaigns to extend parental leave for all parents on the neonatal unit

Having a baby born needing neonatal care is devastating for families and often completely unexpected. Many mums do not realise that their maternity leave will start when their baby is born and most dads and partners, given the limited statutory paternity leave available, will have no choice but to return to work before their baby is home from hospital.

Bliss has been campaigning for many years for the Government to extend statutory parental leave and pay provisions as current policies are rigid and do not offer any extra support to parents whose baby is born needing neonatal care.

Under current provisions:

- Employed mums are entitled to 52 weeks statutory maternity leave, of which 39 weeks are paid. The first six weeks are paid at 90% of the mother's weekly earnings, with the remaining 33 weeks paid at the statutory rate.
- Employed dads and partners are entitled to one or two weeks' paternity leave, which is paid at the statutory rate.
- Eligible parents may want to use shared parental

leave and shared parental pay. In this scenario, up to 50 weeks of leave and 37 weeks of pay can be shared between both parents. The pay element is at the statutory rate.

Bliss is campaigning for both parents to receive an extra paid week of leave for every week their baby spends in neonatal care. Extending leave and pay entitlement will support parents to be fully involved in the care of their baby and reduce the financial burden placed on parents at an already difficult time.

A growing body of evidence clearly demonstrates that when parents are fully able to be partners in care and decision-making for their baby, outcomes for babies and their parents improve – including reduced length of stay and improved bonding.^{1,2} However, key to achieving these positive outcomes is time. It is essential that parents are with their baby daily for long periods of time in order to build their confidence and enable them to take the lead in providing care. In 2018, *The Lancet* published a study that showed when parents participated in family-integrated



Bliss calls on the Government to commit to changing legislation around parental leave for parents with a baby in neonatal care. *Photo credit: Bliss.*

care (FIC) – which required them to be present on the unit for at least six hours per day – their babies had increased weight gain and higher rates of breastfeeding on discharge compared to the standard care group. Parents in the FIC group also had lower mean stress and anxiety scores.³

There are many different barriers that prevent parents from being with their baby, including a lack of appropriate facilities on neonatal units and the additional costs accrued by families while their baby is in hospital. However, the failure of current statutory parental leave measures to have any flexibility for a neonatal stay is prohibitive to parents wanting to participate in the care and decision-making for their baby. Indeed, for families whose baby has been born very prematurely, they may start their leave (with accompanying statutory pay) months before they expected to, exacerbating the financial constraints they may be facing as a result of daily trips to the hospital.

Bliss surveyed its supporters between 7 and 11 February 2019, to assess the impact of the current law on them (TABLE 1). With 737 parents responding (623 mums and 114 dads, who between them had 943 separate experiences of neonatal care and parental leave), we found:

- 66% of dads who responded had to return to work while their baby was still receiving specialist neonatal care
- 36% of dads resorted to being signed off sick in order to spend time with their baby on the neonatal unit.

Dads and partners have to take their paternity leave within 56 days of the birth of their baby, leaving many with a choice between returning to work while their baby is still in hospital in order to use their leave once they are home, or to use their paternity leave while their baby is still in hospital – leading them to return to work once their baby is home. For babies with extended neonatal stays beyond 56 days, dads and partners have no choice but to return to work while their baby is still receiving neonatal care.

Similarly, mums do not feel ready to return to work at the end of their maternity leave when the first days, weeks or months of their leave have been used sitting next to an incubator, full of anxiety and worry, rather than at home bonding with their baby. Many mums express missing out on crucial bonding time and tell us that time on the neonatal unit does not feel like maternity leave.

Due to many babies requiring frequent and numerous follow-up appointments and ongoing medical care at home after discharge, life at home after neonatal care can be difficult for families to adapt to. These ongoing needs can also make it difficult

A quarter of fathers had to choose between taking time off when their baby was in neonatal care, or when their baby went home
77% of parents felt their parental leave was not long enough, with this figure rising to 90% of parents whose baby spent 10 or more weeks in neonatal care
Half of all parents would have liked to take more parental leave but couldn't afford to take any longer off work
24% of dads said they were concerned for their job if they asked for more time off
A fifth of parents whose baby spent 10 weeks or more in neonatal care took unpaid parental leave and/or time off for dependants

TABLE 1 Key findings from Bliss' February 2019 parental leave survey.

to find appropriate childcare when statutory leave ends. Indeed, 12% of mums reported in Bliss' survey that they left their job or did not return to work when their statutory leave came to an end.

At the end of 2018, the Government committed to 'conducting a short, focused internal review' of the parental leave provisions available to parents of babies born needing neonatal care and parents of multiples. As well as supplying evidence to inform the review directly, following national media coverage around our campaigning and survey findings, our supporters sent 3,141 letters to their local MPs calling on them to support our campaign to ask for an extra paid week's leave for every week a baby needs neonatal care. In total, we reached 94% of MPs, with many of them writing to the Health Minister directly to express their support for our policy recommendations.

As yet, we are still waiting on the results of that review.

Bliss once again calls on the Government to commit to changing legislation around parental leave to give both dads and mums an extra paid week off work for every week their baby is in neonatal care. The benefits for babies, parents and employers are clear. It is time to take action and change this outdated and impractical legislation.

References

1. O'Brien K, Bracht M, Macdonell K, et al. A pilot cohort analytic study of family integrated care in a Canadian neonatal intensive care unit. *BMC Preg Childbirth* 2013;13(Suppl 1):S12.
2. Flacking R, Lehtonen L, Thomson G, et al. Closeness and separation in neonatal intensive care. *Acta Paediatr* 2012;101:1032-37.
3. O'Brien K, Robson K, Bracht M, et al. Effectiveness of family integrated care in neonatal intensive care units on infant and parent outcomes: a multicentre, multinational, cluster-randomised controlled trial. *Lancet Child Adolesc Health* 2018;2:245-54.

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