

Let's Talk Menopause

MARGARET LINEHAN*

Munster Technological University, Munster, Ireland

Keywords: access, menopause, institutions, inclusion

The menopause refers to the biological stage when periods stop, and the ovaries lose their reproductive function. This usually occurs between the ages of 45 and 55, but in some cases, women may become menopausal in their 30s, or younger. Every woman experiences the menopause differently. Symptoms can last from a few months to several years and up to 80% of women experience physical and/or emotional symptoms during this time. These symptoms can have a significant impact on their health and wellbeing as well as their work and relationships.

Menopausal women are the fastest-growing demographic in the workplace, and the menopause affects women in 'mid-life' when they are often juggling demanding jobs, school-age children, and elderly parents. This can have an impact on emotional wellbeing and lead to excessive levels of stress (Griffiths *et al*, 2009). Menopause often intersects with a critical career stage, as this is also the age bracket during which women are most likely to move into top leadership positions. Since menopause generally lasts between seven and fourteen years, millions of postmenopausal women are coming into management and leadership roles while experiencing mild to severe symptoms, such as depression, anxiety, sleep deprivation, and cognitive impairment.

* Email: Margaret.Linehan@cit.ie

For every ten women experiencing menopausal symptoms, six say it has a negative impact on their work (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2021). Many women will continue to suffer in silence unless the taboo is broken, and employers and employees start talking openly about menopause at work. Menopause is rarely a topic of open discussion in the workplace - even though nearly half of the world's population experiences, or will experience this biological transition, which marks the end of a woman's menstrual cycle and fertility. In the workplace, women have reported great difficulty in managing symptoms (Paul 2003; Reynolds 1999). They may be unable to disclose their menopausal difficulties due to fear of stigmatisation (Hardy *et al.*, 2019). In Northern Ireland, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (2018) found that almost half of respondents said that the menopause had been treated as a joke in their workplace and 28% said that the menopause was treated negatively in their workplace. As no two women experience the same level, or combination of symptoms, therefore, it is important to provide support on a case-by-case basis.

Attitudes to the menopause can range from empathetic and understanding to insensitive and jokey, to a complete lack of sympathy for employees who are experiencing this normal life event. Menopause is an equality where work factors have the potential to impact positively or negatively on a woman's experience of the menopause and is part of The Equality Act 2010.

Loretta Dignam, who set up the Menopause Hub, a multidisciplinary medical clinic in Dublin in 2018, after experiencing three years of dreadful menopausal symptoms says, 'the menopause is where mental health was ten years ago' (Dignam, 2021). Dignam concludes that women themselves are not well educated about menopause and employers even less so.

To overcome this lack of education, Munster Technological University (MTU) began awareness-raising of the menopause to normalise the issue, thereby minimising the stigma. In April 2021, a series of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion events were offered over a three-week period to all staff, student, and the public. One of these events was a workshop dealing with the menopause, which was delivered by a wellness professional. Interestingly, this was the event which attracted the largest number of attendees which suggested that the time has come for enabling and starting a conversation on the menopause.

The workshop was also valuable as it acknowledged that this is a normal stage of life, and such conversations can identify support at work that can help women remain fully productive. Feedback from the workshop included putting supports in place and signposting them for all employees, highlighting the menopause is a health and wellbeing concern for staff and needs to be handled sensitively, and educating employees about the menopause and providing practical understanding and solutions.

Following the positive feedback from the initial workshop, a further workshop was organized on World Menopause Day, to emphasize that menopause should not be a taboo subject, and everyone should feel confident to have a conversation in their workplace, particularly when they need guidance and advice. The availability of support is a key feature in managing the menopause, therefore, a document with information on where colleagues can access formal support, when they need some additional help and advice, is available through the Human Resources Department, with a contact point of the Employee Assistance Programme.

A commitment to recognizing the menopause as a serious issue will help to foster an inclusive culture where discrimination against women experiencing symptoms will not be tolerated. Workplace 'banter' and jokes regarding the menopause should be treated just as seriously as if they were about any other protected characteristic, as this is most likely targeted at women and may lead to claims of sexual harassment, gender, and age discrimination.

MTU has taken a proactive stance and will promote a greater understanding of the menopause and seek to eradicate any exclusionary or discriminatory practices. A menopause-friendly organization understands the importance and value of supporting those with menopausal symptoms in the workplace. There is still a lot of mystery and misinformation about the menopause and getting some basic facts from a menopause professional has proven to be a good start. Menopause is a natural part of every woman's life and is not always an easy transition. With the right support, it can be much better. While every woman does not suffer symptoms, supporting those who do will improve their work experience.

In summary, MTU has strived to create an environment to talk about the menopause openly, and without embarrassment, by hosting further menopause awareness sessions, emphasizing this is not just an issue for women, but men should be aware too. MTU is committed to making the workplace a menopause-friendly environment.

References

Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. (2021). A Guide to Managing Menopause at Work. Retrieved from https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/line-manager-guide-to-menopause_tcm18-95174.pdf

Dignam, L. (2021). The Menopause Hub. Retrieved from <https://www.themenopausehub.ie/menopause-in-the-workplace>

Griffiths, A. Knight, A., and Mahudin, D. (2009). *Ageing, Work-Related Stress and Health, Reviewing the Evidence: A report for Age Concern and Help The Aged and the Age and Employment Network.*

Hardy, C., Griffiths, A., Thorne, E. (2019). Tackling the Taboo in the UK: Talking about Menopause-related Problems at Work. *International Journal of Workplace Health Management, Vol. 12 (1):28-38.*

Irish Congress of Trade Unions. (2018). Retrieved from <https://www.ictuni.org/publications/ictu-menopause-survey-results/>

Paul, J. (2003). Health and Safety and the Menopause: Working Through the Change. Retrieved from <https://www.tuc.org.uk/workplace-issues/health-and-safety/women-and-health-and-safety/working-through-change>

Reynolds, F. (1999). Distress and Coping with Hot Flashes at Work: Implications for Counsellors in Occupational Settings. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly, 12 (4): 353-61.*

Creating an Age Friendly University

MARGARET LINEHAN

Munster Technological University, Ireland

Keywords: diversity, inclusion, age, institutions

Munster Technological University (MTU), was designated as an Age-Friendly University, in May 2021. MTU has an extensive regional footprint with six campuses across the south-west region of Ireland and has a student body of more than 18,000. MTU now joins a global and growing network of Age-Friendly Universities. This paper illustrates how MTU is a welcoming and inviting place to people of all ages and will summarize some of the core activities which helped achieve Age-Friendly designation.

Since commencing in 2012, Dublin City University developed Ten Principles of an Age-Friendly University which set out a framework for institutions of higher education to embrace Age-Friendly practices. These principles highlight distinctive contributions that can be made by addressing the needs of older adults. To achieve the designation, the university must demonstrate its commitment to ten principles, relating to older adults. Christine O’Kelly, Coordinator for the Age-Friendly Global Network, in Dublin City University, outlined that interpreting the ten principles is different for every university, and a university does not have to adopt all ten principles.

The concept of an Age-Friendly University has its genesis in the Age-Friendly Cities Programme launched by the World Health Organisation in 2010, with a focus on how institutions of higher education can contribute to the programme. The purpose of an Age-Friendly University is to encourage the participation of older adults in all core activities of the university, including educational and research programmes. These have been adopted by universities in Ireland, the UK, the USA, and Canada which together comprise the Age-friendly Universities network.

In 2016, the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education, an educational unit of the Gerontology Society of America, announced its endorsement of the ten age-friendly principles which provide a guiding framework for developing, distinguishing, and evaluating

age-friendly programmes and policies. The Age-friendly University views older adults as a particularly important group whose participation in university life is enriching for everybody. The World Health Organisation's first *Global Report on Ageism* (2021), outlined the goals of healthy ageing and strategies to reduce ageist attitudes at all levels of society. One of these strategies involved intergenerational educational programmes. Clearly, universities have an active role to play here by helping to identify and address age-based myths, stereotypes, and prejudices. Ageism has serious and far-reaching consequences for people's health, well-being, and human rights. Age-Friendly Universities have consequences beyond their campuses, particularly, for their local communities, in exploring how they can meet the needs and interests of their aging populations.

The MTU mission is to lead change and, through education, empower people for a successful future in a globalised world. MTU's vision consists of leading transformation through education, while MTU's values incorporate being inclusive, engaging, dynamic and bold. MTU is fostering a culture for success by preserving the warm, welcoming, entrepreneurial, innovative, people-oriented culture and community for which it is known.

In applying for Age-Friendly University designation, MTU highlighted that it is an equal opportunities employer and has many older staff members engaged in all core activities. MTU also has many older adults as part of its student cohort in both educational and research activities. MTU strongly encourages applications from mature candidates and is continually working towards wider entry routes to increase participation of adult learners. MTU's Mature Student Office hosts information sessions, one-to-one meetings with the Mature Student officers, and offers a peer support network for older students.

MTU has identified proficiency in mathematics as a barrier for some older learners and offers a preparatory maths programme for these students.

MTU promotes the personal and career development of its staff. MTU has a comprehensive programme for continuing staff development committed to meeting the changing demands of the workplace in a dynamic, knowledge-based economy and society and the changing roles of the university staff. It is MTU's policy to make provision for staff development for all

categories of staff. Staff are supported to pursue courses in other Higher Education Institutions at master and doctoral levels.

Two further age-friendly principles which MTU promotes are intergenerational learning and research, together with providing opportunities for 'second careers'. Attracting older adult students can enrich the academic programmes by introducing their life experiences and better prepares the traditional college-age students for the multi-generational workforce they will enter.

In April 2021, as part of MTU's equality, diversity, and inclusion activities, an event celebrating age was held, titled "Age is just a number." The online event offered an insight in generational differences while featuring inspiring talks and experiences of successful MTU professionals. The overall aim was to encourage people to remove the lens of age to view and label individuals, and to shift the focus to their abilities, skills, experience, and knowledge, where it belongs. This event was timely, as it was held during the COVID-19 pandemic, which highlighted the vulnerability of older people, and exposed them to ageism in different stings, for example, discrimination in access to health care, and inadequate protection of older people in care homes. Globally, ageism affects billions of people, with at least one in two people holding ageist attitudes against older adults, with rates much higher in lower-income countries (Officer *et al.*, 2020). In Europe, the only region for which data about ageism are available for all age groups, one in three people have experienced ageism, with rates highest among 15-24-year olds (Abrams *et al.*, 2011).

Finally, and in summary, by working together to promote an inclusive approach to healthy and active ageing and addressing specific issues affecting older adults, ensures that MTU is a university for all ages that welcomes the opportunity to transform lives and societies through education, engagement, research, and innovation.

References

Abrams, D., Russell, P. S., Vauclair, C. M., and Swift, H. (2011). *Ageism in Europe: Findings from the European Social Survey*. London: Age UK.

Officer, A., Thiyagarajan, J. A., Schneiders, M. L., Nash, P. and de la Fuente-Nunez, V. (2020). Ageism, Healthy Life Expectancy and Population Ageing: How Are They Related. *International Journal of Environ Res Public Health*, 17 (9): 31 - 59.

World Health Organisation (2021). *Global Report on Ageism*. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/teams/social-determinants-of-health/demographic-change-and-healthy-ageing/combating-ageism/global-report-on-ageism>