

PREGNANCY IN THE WORKPLACE

I HAVE recently returned from maternity leave (according to me) or a protracted holiday (according to my husband) so started reflecting on pregnancy in the workplace and how it affects employers and employees in the veterinary profession.

Working in the veterinary field while pregnant means extra care must be taken and employers should be informed of pregnancy as soon as possible to ensure safe working practices. Although informing employers at this stage is not a legal requirement, the good news probably shouldn't be hidden until your jeans won't do up any more.

Health and safety

The health and safety of pregnant employees must be paramount and, although most aspects are common sense, highlighting these additional risks to the individual is important.

"Baby brain" can affect even the most level-headed person's judgement, especially with regard to risk in the face of an expanding girth. Remembering pregnant ladies are hormonal and are unlikely to appreciate advice at the time of risk means prior assessment can prevent flaring tempers.

The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations (1992) state the risk to all employees should be assessed; however, this was updated in 1994 and 1999 to account for the additional risks "new or expectant mothers" are susceptible to.

This covers all women who are pregnant, have delivered a baby within the preceding six months or are currently breast-feeding. There is no stated time limit when breast-feeding mothers fall under this umbrella. These guidelines only apply to women who are confirmed to be pregnant – trying to become pregnant does not count, although informing employers can be helpful if this is applicable.

Although our work as vets or vet nurses is risky, pregnancy is not an excuse to stay in the practice completing insurance forms and drinking cups of tea for nine months.

An individual risk assessment should be carried out,



in collaboration with the pregnant woman, for each of the duties she encounters in her employment.

As well as physical risks, this assessment should consider the altered emotional state and increased fatigue the pregnant woman is likely to suffer from. Usually, working practices can be altered to accommodate the changed circumstances of the employee – such as more frequent rest breaks, delegation of radiographic examinations and handling of dangerous chemicals.

Health and safety regulations specifically state employees must not handle cat faeces, the products of abortion, open griseofulvin, corticosteroids, prostaglandins or cytotoxic drugs and must not enter a radiographic controlled area during radiographic examinations.

The other areas commonly addressed during risk assessments of pregnant women can be considered under the headings of physical risk, biological and chemical risk, ergonomic problems and psycho-social aspects (Table 1). It is also important to consider the potential medical problems associated with pregnancy, such as loss of balance and coordination in later pregnancy, tiredness, backache and even more frequent trips to the loo.

These risks should be regularly reassessed throughout the pregnancy although many points will remain unaltered for the pregnancy duration. If it is impossible to create a safe working environment within the practice, then the individual should be offered paid alternative employment elsewhere within the practice.

Night work can only be avoided if a medical certificate states it will jeopardise the individual's health and safety.

Exposure to anaesthetic gases remains controversial. Provided regular monitoring



Vicky and Bethan Rowlands.

of anaesthetic gas levels is undertaken and an individual is happy to accept the "small, but unproven" risk of anaesthetic exposure then she can continue to work in a theatre environment. Some individuals will not be happy to accept this and must not be forced into situations where exposure is possible; others will choose to continue with anaesthetic use, but leave the room if the vapouriser is being filled or if there is risk of spillage.

Antenatal care

During the course of the pregnancy, the employee must be allowed paid time off for antenatal health care appointments; however, fathers do not have a legal right to accompany the mother to these appointments. Time off for these appointments can only be provided if the employer has been made aware of the pregnancy.

Maternity and paternity leave

To qualify for maternity leave, employees must have a contract and be in continuous employment with the company for 26 weeks before the "qualifying week" which is deemed to be 15 weeks before the week of expected delivery. Employees must also earn above a certain threshold, provide evidence of pregnancy and give their employer correct notice. Proof of pregnancy is a letter from a doctor or midwife, or a MATB1 form, which is issued by the midwife at 20 weeks of pregnancy.

The correct notice period is 15 weeks before the expected delivery date. At this time employees should notify employers of the expected delivery date and

Table 1. Potential risks for pregnant veterinary staff

Physical risks	Biological risks	Chemical risks	Ergonomic issues	Psycho-social aspects
Shocks and vibrations	Infectious agents	Products (for example, cleaning agents)	Working practices	Work pressure
Trauma and injury	Zoonoses	Therapeutic agents (including exposure route): Griseofulvin Corticosteroids Cytotoxic agents Opioids Prostaglandins Anaesthetics	Work areas	
Manual handling	Live vaccines			
Noise				
Ionising radiation				

the anticipated start and end dates of maternity leave. This is also the time confirmation of maternity pay can be given, including qualification for statutory pay.

Employees can take up to 52 weeks of maternity leave, which is divided into two, consecutive 26-week blocks, termed ordinary maternity leave and additional maternity leave. Ordinary maternity leave can start any time up to 11 weeks before the expected delivery date.

By law, a woman must not work for two weeks after delivery of her baby, although there can't be many new mothers willing or able to return to such a physical job inside this time frame.

An ordinary paternity leave period of up to two weeks is offered by most companies and should be taken within 56 days of the birth of the child. Additional paternity leave can also be taken, starting any time from 20 weeks after birth if the mother chooses to return to work before the end of the 52-week period after birth. As with maternity leave, this can be taken until 52 weeks after birth.

Other forms of leave

Parental leave allows individuals to take up to 18 weeks of unpaid leave to aid their child's welfare. This can only be taken before the child's fifth birthday, although in some cases it can be taken up until 18 years of age. The maximum annual allowance is four weeks per child.

Employees are also allowed time off to deal with an emergency situation affecting dependants, with no stipulated time limit. This may be paid or unpaid depending on the employer.

Remuneration

Different practices will have different contractual obligations regarding payment during the maternity leave period.

The legal minimum, provided the employee meets the criteria required for maternity leave, is stipulated to be 90 per cent of your aver-

age weekly earnings before tax for six weeks, followed by an additional 33 weeks of statutory maternity pay (SMP), which is £138.18 or a continuation of the previous pay, should it be lower.

Tax and national insurance will also be deducted as applicable. Leave after the initial 39 weeks is unpaid. Ordinary and additional paternity pay is paid at the same rates as maternity pay. Employers can usually reclaim 92 per cent of this statutory maternity pay, although this can be more in the case of small businesses.

Rights

During maternity leave, an employee's rights are unaffected; therefore, holidays and CPD allowance will continue to accrue during this period. In most instances, pension contributions will stop during unpaid leave, although this is, again, specific to individual contracts.

Return to work

Most practices will require eight weeks' notice before returning to work unless the full allocation of maternity leave is taken.

Employees have the right to return to their existing job if they have returned to work before taking any additional maternity leave. If the employee has taken additional maternity leave, she can be offered her original job or a similar job with the same working terms and conditions.

Contrary to popular belief, an employee can be made redundant while on leave, although this can only occur if there are justifiable grounds for redundancy and there is no suitable alternative job available.

As in the case of all redundancies, an employee on leave will have the same rights as an employee currently working.

Employees who care for a child have the legal right to request flexible working hours, although the employer can refuse this request for a valid reason. This request may include part-time employment, flex-

itime, working from home or job sharing. The request should be made in writing, after which the employer has 28 days to meet with the employee, and a further 14 days to allow or deny the request. After this, a revised contract must be completed if the request is accepted.

Keep in touch days

Up to 10 working days can be completed by the employee during the maternity leave period if both the employer and employee agree. This is usually paid at the employee's standard daily rate, but this should be discussed before any work is undertaken. Keep in touch days can allow employees to maintain and hone their skill set and confidence before returning to work.

Summary

Although there are a myriad of different aspects that need to be considered if you employ a pregnant woman or if you are pregnant, there is plenty of guidance available to aid the process. The Government is able to advise on the legal obligations, although it must be remembered individual employee contracts will vary.

Having now returned to work, I can safely say I'm loving being back in touch with adult conversation and I'm sure our baby is loving some variation – staring at my face all day, every day is probably pretty boring.

I did, however, underestimate how fit you need to be as a vet – after my first two days in work, I ached worse than after my first post-baby 10km run.

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graduated from Edinburgh in 2003. After starting work in a mixed practice in Fife, she then specialised in equine work and now works at Ashbrook Equine Hospital. She gained her Certificate in Equine Practice in 2009 and has special interests in orthopaedics and performance related problems.



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