

## Submission to the Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs

Submission to the legislative inquiry, Paid Parental Leave Amendment (Improvements for Families and Gender Equality) Bill 2022

*Prepared by Associate Professor Richard Fletcher PhD, Principal Investigator, SMS4dads, Fathers and Families Research Program, School of Health Sciences, College of Health, Medicine and Wellbeing, The University of Newcastle, NSW.*

### Introduction

#### SMS4dads

SMS4dads ([www.sms4dads.com](http://www.sms4dads.com)) provides new fathers with information and connections to online services through their mobile phones. The text messages with tips, information and links to other services help fathers understand and connect with their baby, support their partner, and monitor their wellbeing. The expected date of delivery or date of birth, which is entered at enrolment, ensure that the texts are linked to the developmental stage of the baby (from week 12 of the pregnancy until 48 weeks post birth). Many texts use the 'voice' of the baby, for example, 'Talk to me about anything dad. Your words will help my brain development' others suggest actions 'Find ways to tell your partner she is doing an amazing job. This could be really important to her'.

Texts, which include links to online resources, also prompt fathers to monitor health behaviours (diet, exercise, social connection) and every three weeks fathers receive a Mood Checker interactive text with escalations to online mental health support. Feedback from dads who have experienced the SMS service so far is overwhelmingly positive with 92% indicating that SMS4dads had helped them in the transition to becoming fathers and 83% responded that the program had helped their relationship with the mother. Comments illustrating what dads think about SMS4dads:

*"Having a baby was the hardest thing I've ever been through, but I always felt validated when I read your SMSs.*

*"Thanks for all the text messages. Thanks for helping me feel not alone*

*"SMS4dads helped me more than I could ever try to explain. I'll miss the encouraging advice and texts*

SMS4dads, and the Indigenous version SMS4DeadlyDads text messaging services have enrolled over 12,000 fathers across Australia since the program began in 2015. The service is currently delivered through the SMS4dads Rural and Remote Fathers project under the Emerging Priorities funding of the Department of Health.

[Comments on the Paid Parental Leave Amendment \(Improvements for Families and Gender Equality\) Bill 2022](#) by A/Prof Richard Fletcher Principal Investigator for SMS4dads

### The missing factor in men's uptake of paternal leave

While these improvements will make a positive difference to the system they leave the process of change unexplored. The legislation assumes that couples will agree that the father reduce his work hours to take advantage of the Paid Parental Leave at the minimum wage.

In order for the provision of shared leave to work fathers must see the benefits beyond financial factors. Evidence from countries which have attempted to increase fathers' uptake of parental leave

demonstrates that fathers are more likely to take leave when it is use it or lose it, when wages or salary is maintained and when the social context, in workplaces and in the community, supports men taking on a caring role. Even with these measures in place fathers do not overwhelmingly embrace the opportunity.

Our experience in conducting fathers' antenatal classes and assisting health services over 30 years to engage fathers points to another important factor: men approaching the birth do not have a clear idea of their importance in caring for the new baby and supporting the mother. They also lack information on 'how to care' and 'how to support'

*A key point in the fathers' antenatal class, usually six weeks before the birth, is to ask, "How long will you take off"? The most common answer is "two weeks". If the next question is "What will you do in the two weeks?" the most common answer is "Whatever she tells me to". This answer reflects the reality that fathers are unprepared for their role post-birth and commonly respond to a distressed baby by handing the baby to the mother (a strategy that is unlikely to help, particularly with the 20% of mothers battling postnatal depression or anxiety).*

If men do not know why they should undertake an activity or how they are to play a part then merely offering the possibility of taking the activity will not be persuasive. Services that are aiming to engage fathers have discovered the faulty reasoning in assuming "If we build it, they will come".

#### **An opportunity to address fathers' understanding of 'why' and 'how'**

Fathers' understanding of the importance of their caring role in the healthy development of their baby will be central to their approach to negotiating their leave taking, and their behaviours while on leave. While the policy goal may be to increase women's workforce participation, motivating and supporting fathers to see caring for newborn babies and infants as normal fathering behaviour will need to be included. The mission of the Women's Economic Equality Taskforce, as currently described in the second reading speech for example, is focused on advising on the distribution of weeks to be shared between couples. However, if the legislation is to succeed in its objective of improving support for families and progressing gender equity, the Taskforce should be charged with offering advice on how to develop a 'caring fathers' approach across government policies and program initiatives.

Currently, while the Paid Parental Leave Amendment (Improvements for Families and Gender Equality) Bill 2022 makes clear that fathers' engagement with infants and children is a priority, other government services and programs continue to unintentionally promote caring as 'mothers' responsibility'. For example, the Preventive and Public Health Research initiative supports Maternal Health and First 2000 Days/Women's Health initiative. Only one of the nine projects funded under the Perinatal Health and Wellbeing Program specifically targeted fathers and the Parenting Education and Support Program makes no provision for fathers.

The Taskforce, in collaboration with the Workplace Gender Equality Agency who have experience in using data to drive improvements on gender balance, could propose a model of father-inclusive policy for government funded services directed at pregnancy, and early childhood. The Taskforce could also advise on effective ways to raise the profile of fathers' care early in the discussion of policy development such as at the planned National Early Years Summit.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on and contribute to this important discussion. I would be happy to discuss further, any clarification or issues raised with you.

Please contact:

Associate Professor, Richard Fletcher PhD  
Principal Investigator, SMS4dads  
Fathers and Families Research Program, School of Health Sciences  
College of Health, Medicine and Wellbeing  
The University of Newcastle, NSW 2308  
Australia