

# Supporting working carers

## Who is a working carer?

A working carer is a person who provides support to someone with an illness or disability, such as cancer, while in paid employment. A carer may be looking after his or her spouse or partner, parent or in-law, child, grandparent, sibling, other close relative, or friend.

Often the person becomes the primary carer of the person with cancer without necessarily identifying him or herself as a 'carer'. Rather, the carer may see it as simply taking care of a family member or friend who needs help.

Many people who become carers will be employed at the time. In fact, the Australian Bureau of Statistics estimates that there are about 1.5 million carers in Australia who are also in paid employment.<sup>1</sup>

The combination of caring and workplace responsibilities places particular demands on a person's time, energy and personal resources. Carers who are employed may be reluctant to tell their employers about their caring responsibilities because they fear it may negatively affect their employment. However, a supportive work environment can make it easier for a working carer to manage his or her situation.

## The carer's juggling act

As well as the usual responsibilities of home and work, a carer will often be providing practical and emotional support to the patient. In addition to tasks that directly support the patient, such as taking him or her to medical appointments, a carer may have to take on additional domestic duties that the patient can no longer do, such as shopping, cooking, cleaning and childcare. Juggling these demands, along with workplace responsibilities, can be very stressful.

Caring can also be an emotional rollercoaster. A person looking after someone with cancer will have to manage his or her own feelings. These may include grief, fear, loneliness, frustration, guilt or

anger about the situation. Research has also found that those who care for cancer patients are more likely to suffer from depression than the cancer patients themselves.

## Supporting carers

Carers are not required to tell their employers that they have caring responsibilities. However, if you are aware that an employee is caring for someone with cancer, it can be helpful to both of you to discuss the situation. There are a number of ways you may be able to provide support to a working carer:

- Discuss whether the carer wants his or her colleagues to know of the situation, and if so, agree on how it should be communicated.
- Facilitate flexible working hours if possible, so that the carer can attend medical appointments or pick up children if required.
- Talk about when the carer is likely to need to take leave so that you can plan to cover any absences.
- Be aware that the carer may need unplanned time off at short notice. Treatment schedules, for example, do not always go exactly as planned.
- Enable the carer to work from home sometimes. Be aware of the workplace health and safety requirements of working from home.
- If appropriate and the carer agrees, consider whether it is possible to temporarily re-allocate some of his or her normal work duties.
- If your organisation has an Employee Assistance Program, encourage the carer to access the counselling services.
- Provide access to a telephone at work, so the carer can stay in touch with the sick person.
- Regularly check in with the carer to discuss how any flexible arrangements are working out, and to assess if the situation has changed.

The support and assistance you are able to provide will depend on the carer's role and the organisation. For example, some jobs may not be conducive to working from home.

## Leave entitlements in Australia

Employers should refer to the National Employment Standards (NES) introduced from 1 January 2010.

Under the NES, most permanent full-time employees are entitled to a minimum of 10 days of paid personal/carer's leave each year, including sick leave.

Permanent part-time employees are entitled to a pro-rata amount of paid personal/carer's leave, based on their work hours. Unused paid personal/carer's leave is carried over to subsequent years.

Once paid personal/carer's leave has been used, each time the person requires care, carers are entitled to an additional two days unpaid carer's leave for caring duties. Both casual and permanent employees are entitled to unpaid carer's leave. Some individual employers also provide additional unpaid carer's leave. Carers may also use their annual leave, then any long service leave to which they are entitled.

Permanent employees are also entitled to two days of paid compassionate leave to spend time with a member of their immediate family who has a life-threatening illness, regardless of whether the employee is the primary carer. Casual employees are entitled to unpaid compassionate leave.

An employee is required to notify his or her employer of inability to work as soon as practicable. The employer may require evidence to substantiate the reason for the leave, for example, a medical certificate or statutory declaration, as specified by the organisation's policies, awards, contracts or workplace agreements.

## Flexible working arrangements

In Australia, carers have the right to request flexible working arrangements to manage caring responsibilities. For example, a carer may wish to start work early in order to leave early to take the patient to a medical appointment.

Employers can only refuse such requests if it would cause unjustifiable hardship to the business. Carers looking after a child, grandchild, parent, grandparent, partner, ex-partner, sibling or in-law are covered by law in Australia.

Caring for someone with cancer can be financially difficult for some people, and continuing to work may be very important. Working carers may also be eligible for a Carer Allowance through Centrelink.

### Where else to find help for working carers

- Carers Australia  
[www.carersaustralia.com.au](http://www.carersaustralia.com.au)
- Commonwealth Respite and Carelink Centre  
[www.commcarelink.health.gov.au](http://www.commcarelink.health.gov.au)
- Working Carers Gateway  
[www.workingcarers.org.au](http://www.workingcarers.org.au)
- Centrelink  
[www.humanservices.gov.au](http://www.humanservices.gov.au)

## How colleagues can help

If a working carer's colleagues are aware of the situation, they may want to do something to help. See the *Supporting a colleague with cancer* fact sheet for some practical tips and suggestions.

<sup>1</sup>Source: 2009 Australian Bureau of Statistics Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers.

### Further information

- National anti-discrimination information gateway  
[www.antidiscrimination.gov.au](http://www.antidiscrimination.gov.au)
- Fair Work Ombudsman  
[www.fairwork.gov.au](http://www.fairwork.gov.au); 13 13 94
- Cancer Council  
[www.cancer.org.au](http://www.cancer.org.au)
- Workplace Fact Sheets – *Supporting a colleague with cancer*  
*Death and bereavement*