

To: Petitions Committee
From: Endometriosis UK
Subject: Menstrual Wellbeing Petition

10 December 2019

Introduction

Menstrual wellbeing affects significant numbers of children and young adults, with common conditions affecting large numbers, for example endometriosis - 10% of women, fibroids - 20%, adenomyosis - 10%; Polycystic Ovary Syndrome -10%. Yet diagnosis can take many years, for example the average length of time to diagnosis for endometriosis is 7.5 years.

Diagnosis can be delayed due to lack of awareness of what is 'normal' for menstrual wellbeing and those suffering not seeking help, and the taboo of talking about menstrual issues. There is clearly a key educational role needed to enable better awareness and understanding of menstrual wellbeing and overcome the taboo, so those suffering are able to seek help.

Our thoughts on the attached document

Endometriosis UK welcomes the inclusion of symptom awareness around menstrual health and guidance on when and where to look for medical help within the new curriculum. However, we believe the existing language and content does not go far enough to ensure children will be given adequate information about their menstrual wellbeing. We strongly believe menstrual wellbeing should be specifically mentioned, and included as compulsory, as it is in the new PSHE curriculum in England.

Within the What Matters statement 'Developing Physical Health and Wellbeing has lifelong benefits' we would like this to be specifically amended to include the following line alongside the reference to puberty:

- Pupils should understand the key facts about menstrual wellbeing, including the key facts about the menstrual cycle.

This simple yet vital addition would ensure inclusion of age appropriate menstrual wellbeing education included into all schools.

What we would like to see amended

Within the What Matters statement 'Developing Physical Health and Wellbeing has lifelong benefits' we would like this to be specifically amended to include the following line alongside the reference to puberty:

- Pupils should understand the key facts about menstrual wellbeing, including the key facts about the menstrual cycle.

We are concerned that the absence of specific mention of the phrase menstrual wellbeing will leave pupils unequipped to deal with the potential challenges associated with puberty; and continue to delay seeking help. We are concerned that menstrual wellbeing will only be a consideration for schools when designing the curriculum and will not be a compulsory part of the curriculum. Although the new curriculum has new promising additions such as symptom awareness of menstrual health conditions, the content as it stands does not provide enough information on what constitutes a normal menstrual cycle. Shifting the terminology from puberty to also incorporate "menstrual wellbeing" will also ensure that the whole menstrual cycle is understood rather than just puberty itself. This would also fall in line with England and will ensure no child in Wales is left behind.

The exclusion of menstrual wellbeing in the existing draft curriculum is also amplifying societal fears in talking openly about menstruation and female health issues. Without the opportunity to talk openly in the

classroom about menstrual wellbeing, children will continue to feel embarrassed and unable to talk about what is a normal bodily function. A survey conducted by Plan International ¹ found that:

- Nearly half (48 per cent) of girls aged 14 to 21 in the UK are embarrassed by their periods
- One in seven (14 per cent) girls admitted that they did not know what was happening when they started their period and more than a quarter (26 per cent) reporting that they did not know what to do when they started their period
- Only one in five (22%) girls feel comfortable discussing their period with their teacher

We are also concerned by the phrase “This revised learning will allow for menstrual wellbeing to be considered by schools when designing the curriculum”. Menstrual wellbeing should not be a consideration but compulsory for all children regardless of gender as it is fundamental to every aspect of school and future life. Without this being compulsory, teachers will be able to design a curriculum that fails to equip children with the knowledge, confidence, and support to seek help when it might be necessary and fails to remove the unnecessary taboo associated with menstruation. This may also lead to inconsistency across Wales – meaning that whilst some may receive adequate information and support, others will be left behind. Making menstrual wellbeing compulsory for all would ensure no child in Wales was left behind.

The need for menstrual wellbeing to be compulsory in all schools and why the current plans fail to address the issues that we have raised

Endometriosis, one many potential menstrual health conditions children could suffer from, affects 10% of women from puberty to menopause and costs the UK economy £8.2 billion in loss of work, healthcare costs and treatment. The average diagnosis for endometriosis takes 7.5 years, meaning some children could suffer with potentially debilitating symptoms for the majority of school life. ²

Menstrual wellbeing needs to be a compulsory element of any new curriculum – as education around menstrual wellbeing is absolutely key to shifting social attitudes associated with puberty and ensuring all children are able to reach their full potential and lead happy and healthy lives; and are able to identify and articulate when what they are experiencing is not normal so they are able to seek help.

Endometriosis UK is encouraged to see the inclusion of symptom awareness around menstrual health and guidance on when and where to look for medical help within the new curriculum.

However, we do not feel the existing language and content goes far enough to ensure children will be given adequate advice and information about menstrual health. The absence of the phrase menstrual wellbeing within the National Framework will mean children will continue to feel alienated and misinformed about what is happening to their body and unequipped to deal with a menstrual health condition such as endometriosis. The compulsory inclusion of menstrual wellbeing would be a very simple amendment to the existing content within the framework and would help overcome lengthy delays in seeking help and receiving treatment for a menstrual condition, thus reducing the impact on a sufferer’s education.

The impact delayed diagnosis and missed education can have on a person’s life cannot be overstated. In October 2019³, the BBC conducted a research project and surveyed over 13,500 people with endometriosis. The results showed the shocking impact endometriosis can have on all aspects of a person’s life including their education, career, and mental health.

Of those who took part:

- Nearly all said it had badly affected their career and mental health
- Most said it had impacted on their education

¹ Plan International (2017) <https://plan-uk.org/media-centre/plan-international-uks-research-on-period-poverty-and-stigma>

² Endometriosis facts and figures: <https://www.endometriosis-uk.org/endometriosis-facts-and-figures>

³ BBC Research on endometriosis (2019): <https://www.endometriosis-uk.org/news/bbc-research-announced-today-wake-call-provide-better-care-15-million-endometriosis-37606#.XfDTm2T7SUK>

- Around half said they had experienced suicidal thoughts.

This shows the need for the Welsh Government to take menstrual health conditions seriously – and ensure everyone from a young age understands the symptoms of menstrual health conditions such as endometriosis. Without such education, children may delay seeking help, meaning they are missing out on education without a medical diagnosis or name for their condition. This not only has a negative impact on a child's education, but also means teachers are left unable to provide the additional support a child may need to help them through their school life.

Case study

For 15 years from the age of 12 Jade Morgan was told the severe pain she was experiencing as part of her menstrual cycle was completely normal. Whilst at school, Jade struggled to pass her exams due to excruciating pain, fatigue, and bowel and bladder related problems associated with her endometriosis. Jade launched a petition in June 2019 to call on the Welsh Government to introduce compulsory menstrual wellbeing education so that other children don't suffer in silence without knowing when to seek help. Jade says that had she been taught menstrual wellbeing including what is and isn't normal when it comes to menstrual related pain, she could have sought help sooner. Jade's story isn't unique – and a recent social media poll conducted by Endometriosis UK of endometriosis sufferers found that:

- 93% would have sought help sooner if they had been taught about menstrual wellbeing at school (2300 respondents).
- 78% felt that their period caused them to feel isolated at school (940 respondents)
- 98% felt that they were not provided with all the information they needed to know about menstrual health at school (1300 respondents)
- 87% had to miss school because of their menstrual cycle (1100 respondents).

Resource support from Endometriosis UK

We recognise that teachers will need to be given the necessary resources and the confidence to teach about menstrual wellbeing, and we would welcome the opportunity to work with the Education Department to help produce simple, easy to use and free resources for schools to include in lessons.

Contact us:

For further information, please contact us on communications@endometriosis-uk.org