

## Local Government and Communities Committee

### Call for Views on the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Bill

#### Submission from RCN Scotland

#### Introduction

The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) is the world's largest professional organisation and trade union for nursing staff, with members in the NHS, independent and third sectors. RCN Scotland promotes patient and nursing interests by campaigning on issues that affect members, shaping national health policies, representing members on practice and employment issues and development opportunities. With around 40,000 members in Scotland, the RCN is the voice of nursing.

As nurses we are well placed to make a real difference on the issue of period poverty. Whatever setting nursing staff work in, they will undoubtedly come into contact with people who are menstruating and for whom this may be causing knock-on physical, social or mental effects. The RCN Women's Health Forum is currently developing a resource to support all nursing staff to have really open, fruitful conversations about periods with the people in their care, in order to tackle stigma and encourage people to seek help if they are experiencing pain, discomfort or embarrassment when menstruating.

RCN Scotland has also been working to facilitate more open discussions around menstruation and other women's health issues. We recently held, in partnership with Thistle Foundation, an afternoon of world café discussions on women's health, busting myths and sharing experiences on Scotland's progress to being a period positive nation. The event was opened by Monica Lennon MSP and was a very positive opportunity for more open and inclusive conversations on these health issues.

This year we also hosted an RCN Library exhibition 'The Wandering Womb: Women's health nursing past and present' which explores themes including menstruation, miscarriage, menopause and gynaecological cancers, and how nursing as a profession has challenged the myths and misconceptions around women's health.

Rather than covering all of the issues raised by the Committee in its call for views, this response focuses on a number of the questions posed.

**1. The Bill has been brought forward partly in response to concerns about "period poverty" - difficulty in being able to afford period products. Do you think period poverty is a serious issue in Scotland? Please provide any relevant information you may have to support your views.**

It is increasingly recognised that good menstrual health is an essential component to wellbeing. Period poverty is the lack of access to sanitary products due to financial constraints. A UK-wide survey<sup>1</sup> conducted by Plan International UK in 2017 reported that: one in ten girls aged 14-21 have been unable to afford sanitary products; one in seven have had to ask to borrow sanitary wear from a friend due to affordability issues; and one in ten have had to improvise sanitary wear.

We welcome the Scottish Government's action to address period poverty by making free sanitary products available to students in schools, colleges and universities across Scotland, in addition to its partnership with FareShare and other organisations to distribute period products to those on low incomes. These are important steps but there are many more vulnerable people in our society who could continue to struggle to access appropriate period products each month.

## **2. Do you support the overall aim of the Bill - that no one in Scotland should have to pay for period products and that this should be set out in law?**

Menstrual health has been high on the agenda of the RCN Women's Health Forum for some time now. At this year's RCN Congress one of the forum members, who is a sexual health nurse, proposed a resolution on period poverty in order to bring the RCN's unique nursing perspective to the campaign to tackle period poverty. The following resolution was debated and passed by RCN members:

*"That this meeting of Congress calls upon Council to lobby governments across the UK to end period poverty."*

RCN Scotland therefore strongly supports the campaign to end period poverty and the overall aim of this Bill.

During the RCN Congress debate on period poverty one of our Scottish members said: "A patient once came up to me to say she'd started her periods but, because of benefit sanctions, was using a sock. I searched the ward to find her something and found razors, shaving gel, toothbrushes, toothpaste – but not a single sanitary product. I had to go out and buy her some. And that's not right."

Other comments from RCN members during the debate include:

"Periods are a totally normal part of life and the mindset around them really needs to change. Sanitary wear is not a luxury item. I certainly never feel in luxury at my time of the month. We're being taxed on having a uterus and it needs to end."

"I have endometriosis, with unpredictable and heavy periods. Although I have a good job as a nurse, it still costs me an absolute fortune every month. I'm also a single mum and I have two girls coming up to period age now as well. It's a real worry for me."

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<sup>1</sup> <https://plan-uk.org/media-centre/plan-international-uks-research-on-period-poverty-and-stigma>

"I had a fellow student whose culture meant that this subject was taboo. She approached me while I was on the ward and said "I've started my period and I don't have any products." She wasn't able to speak to her father about it and her mum was away. She felt uncomfortable talking about it and because she was a student she didn't have the funds to go out herself and buy them. I went searching around the ward and couldn't find any sanitary products so I went to my bag and provided her with a stash of pads and the following day brought in a pack of pads to last her through. This shouldn't be happening and it really needs to end."

"This is something we need to talk about. No young girl or woman should be without sanitary products. We, as nurses, can empower everyone."

"Growing up in the 50s and 60s, there was no mention of periods. They simply did not exist. My sister and I had to improvise sanitary products. Sixty years on, I can't get my head around the fact that there is still this type of period poverty."

It's also important to recognise that period poverty isn't just about money, it's also about the embarrassment, shame and taboo that continues to shroud menstruation. This can lead to people feeling too uncomfortable to reach out for help when they experience difficulties. We therefore support the aim of the Bill to establish a universal period products scheme that is accessible and recognises differing needs. It will be important that any scheme is designed in such a way to avoid stigma, so that vulnerable people are not discouraged from using it.

**4. The Bill would allow the Scottish Government to require organisations other than schools and colleges to provide free period products. Do you support this? If so, what other organisations should be legally made to provide free products?**

During the RCN Congress debate some RCN members shared their experience of having to supply a patient or colleague with their own period products, or buy them some, because they were not able to access them. We therefore believe the Scottish Government should consider requiring free period products to be provided in hospitals and other residential health and care settings. While period products will already be available in many health and care settings, it is important to ensure that all those who need them are able to access suitable products in hospitals or in other settings such as hospices, residential care, custody suites and prisons. However given the financial challenges facing health boards and integration authorities, the Scottish Government should provide sufficient funding to support any expansion of the statutory requirement to provide free period products.