

Paid parental leave icing on the cake for new mothers ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Chilli Valentina was born five days early, or six years late, according to new parents Jacquie Thomas and Cristiano Cochis.

But because Chilli didn't "hang on" until her due date of January 4, and was born at 12.57pm on December 31, the family is ineligible for the federal government's paid parental leave that came into effect yesterday.

They will still receive the baby bonus, and after tax, will be only about \$2000 worse off.

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Across the corridor at the Royal Women's Hospital, Emilee Tayla was born on New Year's Day. Mum Chelsea Ashworth, who is an administrator at the hospital, is entitled to the government payments of \$570 a week over 18 weeks, on top of the eight weeks of paid maternity leave her employer offers.

Ms Ashworth, who also has sons aged four and two, was understandably foggy on the details of the scheme. She and her husband, Richard, had attended a New Year's Eve party, went home to bed at about 2am. She woke up at 3.30am with contractions about five minutes apart. Emilee was born at 5.27am.

"I wasn't trying to hold off until this year; of course that didn't even enter my head," Ms Ashworth said.

"I've got no idea how [paid parental leave] works. I haven't even applied ... But I think it will take a lot of worry out about our finances when we're on one wage."

Paid parental leave met with more fanfare at a Sydney maternity ward, where Prime Minister Julia Gillard kicked off the new year by congratulating new mothers who "hung on" until January 1. "It's making history ... for mums and dads, for babies and for employers," she said.

"Finally, Australia has a paid parental leave scheme which will make a difference for working families."

About 7500 people have lodged claims for the leave, which is expected to be taken up by 148,000 Australian families a year, at a cost of \$260 million.

For many women, it is long overdue. Until yesterday, Australia was the only country in the OECD, apart from the United States, without universal paid parental leave.

Former Democrats leader Natasha Stott Despoja, who first attempted to pass legislation for paid parent leave in 2002, said both major political parties were culpable for a generation of families who missed out on its benefits. "I think it has taken so long due to mostly a lack of political will and understanding and outdated notions of the role of the working woman," she said.

Professor Barbara Pocock, a workplace expert at the University of South Australia, said pressure was now on government and employers to give men the opportunity to take leave from work when their children were born.

- reprinted from the Sydney Morning Herald

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