

MS fears at work incorrect, study finds

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WORKPLACE

AFTER a decade with multiple sclerosis, Fiona Hall is all too familiar with the uncomfortable walk to the boss's office to talk about her disease.

"I've had the full gamut of reactions - from being supported to being sacked. So little is known about MS in the wider community, you are scared about how people are going to react," said Ms Hall, 57.

A new survey reveals thousands of Australians with MS are putting off telling their employer about their disease for months or even years, fearing discrimination. As a result they are not dealing properly with the symptoms as they progress and many are forced to quit prematurely.

"Sixty-four per cent of people with MS are not in the labour force, that's far higher than for depression or diabetes," the lead researcher of the *Living with multiple sclerosis* longitudinal survey, Rex Simmons, said.

"These people are certainly capable of continuing to make a real contribution to the workforce if they continued to manage their MS."

Multiple sclerosis is an inflammatory disease of the central nervous system in which the nerve fibres in the brain and spinal cord progressively degrade, causing a range of symptoms such as muscle weakness, fatigue and chronic pain. The disease can be managed very effectively for many years with rest, medication and modifications to the home or workplace to accommodate reduced mobility.

But Dr Simmons and his fellow researchers found that many employees with MS were leaving planning for these symptoms too late, meaning that when an attack came they could not cope. Many then chose to resign.

"This strong fear of discrimination, that you won't be promoted or that you'll be sacked, is preventing people from planning in advance with the employer and in some cases not telling their employer at all," he said.

But the fear of discrimination was largely unfounded, the study found, with only 15 per



"So little is known about MS in the wider community" ... Fiona Hall has lived and worked with multiple sclerosis for 10 years. Photo: Helen Nezdropa

cent of people leaving their jobs because they were sacked.

The most common reasons given for leaving employment were fatigue (69.5 per cent), physical problems with legs and feet (43.8 per cent) or arms or hands (39.4 per cent), symptoms

than can be managed with rest and medication.

The survey also found that a large number of sufferers believed their position was at risk because their condition was preventing them from doing a good job. "This fear is quite tra-

gic," Dr Simmons said. "The disease strikes when people are having children and balancing with working. They are dropping out prematurely before they really need to and it's having significant impact on their self-esteem and their lives."