


## Please don't sneeze on me

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Everyone seems to have a cold or a flu at the moment so I guess I should not be so disgusted by what happened to me this morning. But as I am I thought I should write about it.

Handing over some coins for my daily bread at the local bakery, the lovely young girl who served me revealed she was sick with a lurgi.

Then she sneezed. All over the bread.

I was speechless. What on earth was she doing at work, handing out food other people are going to eat, if she had something contagious?

So I asked her just that. She said she didn't feel she could call in sick given she did so the previous day and another worker had to cover for her. She didn't think she could ask her colleague to step in for her twice in a row.

Since when did the roster fall on the shoulders of the counter staff? I do not understand why the manager, who must have known she was sick given that she'd called in crook the previous day, allowed her to be on the floor.

She also should not have felt it was her obligation to come to work – especially given she works with food.

This bakery has plenty of staff – I see at least five different people working behind the counter through the week. Surely one of those people could have stepped in? Or maybe they all had the same bug?

Allowing this poor, sick girl to be on her feet serving customers all day when she was clearly under the weather and should have been in bed was a very bad business decision. It's also potentially illegal.

Tracy Angwin, the managing director of the Australian Payroll Association, points out that under the *Occupational Health & Safety Act 2004*, an employer is legally obligated to provide a healthy and safe workplace for its employees.

"This means staff members who do not consider taking sick leave and employers who do not enforce time off could be breaking the law. Penalties for breaches of the *Occupational Health & Safety Act 2004* have substantially increased, with maximum penalties now at \$1,075,050 for a business and \$215,010 for its directors," says Angwin, pointing out that the fines vary depending on the state in which you live.

"Employees who turn up to work exhausted and physically ill are not behaving responsibly. Nor is it responsible for employers to tolerate it because they are endangering themselves and other people in the workplace.

Furthermore, in the case of food preparation, cooking and serving, the likelihood is that any viruses will

"If an employee making food is sneezing profusely, automatically the customers will react by thinking 'they'd better not be serving our food'. Ultimately if the employee attends work sick I would expect the company to intervene and do right by their business and OH&S policies," he says.

Aside from the health risks a sick worker poses to customers, if you're happy to let someone sick serve customers, what other occupational health and safety corners are you prepared to cut?

Does this bakery clean the equipment properly? Do they clean up after the shop closes? What vermin lurk near the flour and sugar after hours?

Now I've had these thoughts, it's unlikely I'll be going back there. With heaps of other bakeries in my area – I can easily think of five others without even taking into account the chains – there's plenty of choice. And although I'm obviously not naming and shaming the bakery in this story, I've told this tale to neighbours and friends, who will also no doubt think twice about going there.

That's the damage a single sneeze can do. The manager should have taken charge of the situation, excused this girl from work for a couple of days, and even worked in the business themselves if necessary.

The upshot of the story is that I threw the bread away and so far haven't come down with anything. But if they'd made this girl stay at home they would still have me as a customer. That was one expensive sneeze.

**What do you think? How should small businesses manage sick staff?**