

Tranquilliser addiction 'dangerous as heroin abuse'

Jean West

Prescribed tranquillisers should be reclassified in line with heroin and cocaine, campaigners have said, after new government figures showed one person dies from their use in Scotland every second day.

The call comes after statistics attributed 185 deaths, more than a quarter of all narcotic fatalities last year, to drugs prescribed for sleep and anxiety.

Campaigners also urged the establishment of special clinics to help people give up the pills, thought to be more addictive than heroin. The drugs,



Temazepam is among the group of prescribed drugs to which patients become easily addicted

known collectively as benzodiazepines, include diazepam, lorazepam and temazepam.

Hundreds of people in Scotland have become addicts after being given the drugs outside the 2-4 week prescription guidelines. Street addicts are also using them in the wake of a national heroin shortage — mixing them with opiates and alcohol. Some batches of heroin are cut with benzodiazepines.

The Scotland Office figures for drug deaths in 2011 have shown that heroin was responsible for just 21 more deaths than benzodiazepines — though methadone fatalities were much higher. With 1.5 million people addicted to the pills in the UK, campaigners say the NHS is sitting on a time bomb.

Barry Haslam who runs TranX, an independent drug helpline for addicts, nearly died whilst taking the drugs for anxiety. He was prescribed 30mg of lorazepam and suffered seizures, violent sickness and hallucinations.

"Just because a drug is prescribed does not mean it is safe. These drugs need to be reclassified from class C to class A to give them equal status to heroin," Mr Haslam said.

Problems in other countries mirror the situation in Scotland. In England the drugs cause 600 annual deaths and in New York in 2009 more than 30 per cent of the city's overdose deaths were linked to benzodiazepines.

Withdrawal caused Mr Haslam months of agony and his weight fell from 14 to seven stones: "People don't know where to turn. It is so dangerous to come off these drugs quickly. People die this way and from overdose."

"Education is needed to prevent further deaths but there seems to be little help beyond NHS services for withdrawal from street drugs or alcohol."

He said doctors had unwittingly become dealers. "Legal patients get caught up in this mess because doctors are not making them aware of the dangers. Street addicts can get benzodiazepines off the internet not realising what they are getting into."

One patient, who did not want to be named, was given diazepam in 1992 for back pain. "No one told me if you took them for more than four weeks they were addictive. I was on them 12 weeks and stopped. It was terrifying."

"I felt I was going to die. I started taking the drug again. I couldn't cope with withdrawal but then I began get-

“ I was on them for 12 weeks and then I stopped. I felt like I was going to die ”

ting symptoms on them I had seizures. Now I am frightened that they could kill me before I get off them."

Jim Dobbin MP for Heywood and Middleton and chairman of the all-party group on involuntary tranquilliser addiction at Westminster, is calling on politicians to unite as he takes the matter to the Council of Europe. He believes as the black market gets a bigger foothold the problem could become much more serious than that of heroin.

"There are something like 3000 addicts for every UK town. I support the proposal to reclassify them. I have seen so much damage," Mr Dobbin said.

A spokesman for the Government said decisions on the type of treatment to prescribe were for individual clinicians, in discussion with their patient.

Changes to tax rules 'will cost developing world £4bn'

Sam Coates Deputy Political Editor

The Treasury is facing significant criticism today for its plans to relax tax rules for multinational companies.

Changes going through Parliament "will incentivise multinational corporations to shift profits into tax havens", according to MPs on the International Development Select Committee.

The move will cost the Exchequer £1 billion in revenue, and is being done to make Britain "more competitive". But it is likely to cause embarrassment for the coalition, because the Liberal

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Democrats made tackling tax evasion and avoidance a priority.

The 2012 Finance Bill is changing the rules governing Controlled Foreign Companies, ending the requirement for UK-owned corporations that report profits in jurisdictions with corporation tax lower than 23 per cent to "make up the difference" to HM Revenue and Customs.

From January 1, the UK will be able to impose this extra levy only if the profits have been shifted from the UK. The change will make it easier and more lucrative for companies to shift their profits out of developing countries and into tax havens. This reduces their profits in the developing world,

enabling them to pay less tax there.

The charity Action Aid says that the change could cost developing countries £4 billion. The Treasury admits that it has not conducted its own estimate of the impact of the change, but it disputes this figure.

MPs are calling this a perverse policy outcome because it undermines efforts by the Department for International Development, which spends significant sums of taxpayer money helping African countries to improve tax collection.

The Treasury says that it is making the change to help Britain to become more competitive. It argues that the existing rules are outdated and that the tax rules do not take into account the tax revenues for other countries.

The change could mean that the authorities know a lot less about money transferred to tax havens.

Rachel Reeves MP, the Shadow Chief Secretary, said: "It is astounding that given the rhetoric coming from the coalition on tax avoidance, that despite warm words from Liberal Democrats, we were voted down by coalition MPs on this issue. Labour has been pushing for over a year for proper studies into the impact of these changes."

A Treasury spokeswoman said: "The UK's Controlled Foreign Company rules protect UK tax revenues and were never designed to protect other countries' tax revenues."

"Their reform will encourage investment and drive growth in the UK. It is not sustainable for developing countries to protect their revenue using our tax rules."

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