



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

Anne Milton MP
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Public Health
Department of Health
79 Whitehall
London SW1A 2NS

Our Ref: KHM/HASL02003/02110332

28 July 2011

Dear Ms Milton,

Addiction to Benzodiazepines

Thank you for your letter of 5th July 2011 regarding addiction to benzodiazepines.

As you are aware, an investigation by Radio 4's Face the Facts, which was broadcast on 27th July, revealed prescription numbers in England for benzodiazepines – a group of tranquillisers commonly prescribed for insomnia and anxiety – are rising, and there's little help for those who become addicted and want to withdraw.

Estimates suggest up to one and a half million people across the UK could be addicted to these drugs. Yet in England, the number of prescriptions issued last year rose by 8 per cent to almost eleven and a half million.

Guidelines first issued to GPs in 1988 say that the drugs, which include diazepam and temazepam, should not be given to patients for longer than 2 to 4 weeks. However, a report published in May, which looked at prescribing in England for the 19 years to 2009, found over a third of prescriptions were for more than 8 weeks.

I was pleased to hear you state on the programme that prescription drug addiction was an issue that has 'fallen through the cracks' and your assurance that the Department of Health would now 'get a grip' of it by working with GPs to raise awareness and get the right services in place to aid withdrawal.

As you are aware, Oldham takes a unique approach to benzodiazepine addiction. Addiction Dependency Solutions (ADS Oldham) won a contract in 2004 from the PCT to supply benzodiazepine specialists to address Oldham's large problem of 5,200 long-term benzodiazepine drug addicts. These specialists have a base centre, but also work at GP's surgeries.

In addition, Oldham Tranx is a support group, set up 22 years ago, for people addicted to GP prescribed benzodiazepine drugs. Oldham is the only town in the UK with a specialist benzodiazepine treatment withdrawal service and a support group who work together to solve this issue.

I believe that the time is now for the Department of Health to take concerted action on the scale of addiction nationwide, the pressing need for treatment and the lessons that can be learned from Oldham's approach to tackling this neglected issue.

There are several issues that I would appreciate your comments on. In your letter of 5th July, you state that "the drug strategy makes it clear that local areas must take account of the diverse needs of their community when commissioning services."

I believe that all PCTs need to quantify the number of long term addicts (over 4 months) of prescribed patients taking benzodiazepines and z drugs, in order to ensure that they do not ignore the needs of iatrogenic benzodiazepine drug addicts. I would be grateful if you would let me know what plans you have to communicate with PCTs, in order that individual PCTs can then commission the correct services and allocate funding accordingly? I would also like to know what plans you have to ensure continuity of care between PCTs, PCT clusters and CCGs.

Oldham quantified their problem in 2004 of 5,200 addicts and allocated funding, services and support to this issue. However, I am concerned that Oldham PCT is the only one doing so.

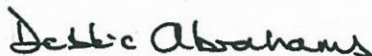
You will be aware that many in the benzodiazepine addiction community have their reservations about the methodology and content of the recently published Government reports and no doubt you will have seen the Independent article of 26th July that states that Prof John Strang, head of the National Addiction Centre at King's College London and author of the government report on the prescription of potent psychiatric sedatives, did not declare research funding from a drug company that manufactures two commonly prescribed tranquillisers. I am concerned about a possible conflict of interest that could have arisen in this case and would be grateful for your comments.

I understand that you intend to hold a 'roundtable' on benzodiazepine addiction in the autumn and would be grateful if an invitation to this meeting could be extended to Barry Haslam, my constituent, advisor to the APPG on Involuntary Tranquilliser Addiction and founder of Tranx, and to Suzanne Atredes of Oldham ADS.

I believe their hands-on experience over many years would provide invaluable insight into your discussions on this issue.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely



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Oldham East and Saddleworth

c.c.

Barry Haslam

Jim Dobbin MP

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Lady Rhoda Bradley, CEO, ADS