

health

How doctors are turning millions of us INTO addicts

By Jerome Burne

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Hooked: It's thought between three and seven million Britons are addicted to prescription drugs

Gina Loxam was feeling a bit low, so she went to see her GP and was prescribed the anti-depressant, Seroxat.

Ten years later, she is still on the drug because the severe mood swings, headaches, fatigue and weight gain she suffers when she tries to come off are unbearable.

Gina, a 52-year-old finance and quality manager, is one of more than 600 people now suing the pharmaceutical company GlaxoSmithKline for damages on the grounds that

they were not warned of the possible side-effects, such as personality changes, as well as addiction.

'The doctor told me it was not addictive and that's what it said on the information sheet,' says Gina, who lives near Morecambe in Lancashire.

Seroxat now carries the warning that some patients can have problems coming off it.

However, the Seroxat patients are a tiny proportion of the growing number of people addicted to prescription drugs.

It's thought that between three and seven million Britons are affected, with antidepressants, tranquillisers, sleeping pills and pain-killers the main culprits.

A recent report by the United Nations' International Narcotics Control Board predicted that the scale of the problem of addiction to legal drugs will soon overtake addiction to banned substances.

Yet despite this, few patients receive any effective help - meanwhile, millions of pounds are spent helping those addicted to illegal drugs. In fact, the problem of prescription addiction has, for years, been ignored or denied by drug companies and successive governments.

The move to sue GlaxoSmithKline is just one sign of growing pressure for some sort of action. Earlier this year, a House of Commons inquiry into addiction to prescription drugs concluded that action was needed.

[Inquiry confirms suspicions](#)

The inquiry, by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Drug Misuse, heard evidence that, despite official warnings, tranquillisers in particular can be addictive, and that GPs were still handing them out on repeat prescriptions without seeing the patients to make sure they weren't having any problems.

It was in 1988 that the drug watchdog first warned GPs not to give these tranquilliser drugs - known as benzodiazepines - for longer than a few weeks.

The instruction is still being ignored and benzodiazepines (the most widely used is Valium) are still prescribed in large numbers - more than nine million prescriptions in England in 2007 alone.

And as Good Health has discovered, 12 per cent of those prescriptions were for more than 58 days, meaning they were intended for longterm use.

Professor Heather Ashton of Newcastle University is one of the few academics trying to get a sense of the scale of the problem.

'I estimate that on average there are more than 180 patients in every general practice in the UK who have been taking benzodiazepines for six months or more,' she says. 'They are all at high risk of adverse effects caused by the drugs.'

Today, as many as one-and-a-half million people in the UK may be addicted to benzodiazepines.

'We also heard reports that an increasing number of people were having problems coming off other drugs, particularly sleeping pills, SSRI antidepressants and painkillers,' says Dr Brian Iddon, the Labour MP chair of the Drug Misuse parliamentary group.

Injustice

Patients who have become addicted to prescription drugs are filled with an all-too understandable sense of injustice.



Withdrawal symptoms: Coming off benzodiazepines can trigger panic attacks

'We took these medicines in good faith,' says Barry Haslam, who was addicted to benzodiazepine for ten years after being prescribed it for work-related stress and anxiety. 'No one ever warned about what might happen,' he says.

He now runs the Rock Street Resource Centre in Oldham, one of a handful in the country that supports people addicted to prescription drugs.

Professor Ashton has analysed the level of GPs prescribing benzodiazepines in the North-East of England and calculated that 78,000 people in the area had been on benzodiazepines for more than six months. 'A little over half - 45,000 - are likely to suffer withdrawal symptoms,' she says.

The number of affected patients in Oldham alone is reckoned to be 5,000. Yet Haslam receives only enough funding for one full-time and one part-time counsellor to visit GPs' surgeries to offer help.

'It's a drop in the ocean. These are dreadful drugs,' says the former accountant. 'They took ten years from my life. I missed my daughter growing up.'

Trying to come off benzodiazepines can cause panic attacks, insomnia, nightmares, muscle spasms and hallucinations. And even if you manage it, you may suffer a range of permanent symptoms such as post-traumatic stress and severe stomach upsets; your memory is likely to be poorer.

But staying on them is not a solution either, because you are permanently sedated, more likely to suffer from falls and be wrongly diagnosed with dementia, as well as being depressed or aggressive.

Successfully getting off these drugs takes skill, patience, frequent contact with the doctor - assets and expertise that, according to Professor Ashton, 'most doctors do not have'.

Absence of support

The almost total absence of support is in stark contrast to the millions spent helping those addicted to banned drugs.

Last year, centres run by the National Treatment Agency helped 195,000 people to come off illegal drugs. In the same period, the Agency reported that it was treating just 132 patients with benzodiazepine addiction.

According to the Department of Health, there are facilities to treat patients addicted to a prescribed drug 'in a primary care setting or by mental health services'.

But it's a far cry from the reality experienced by some of those working in the field. Pam Armstrong is a nurse who for the past 20 years has run a charity called CITA (Council Against Tranquilliser Addiction), specialising in helping people come off prescription drugs in Liverpool.

'Doctors and even psychiatrists are not very good at it,' she says. 'If someone has started withdrawing and is having all sorts of side-effects their doctor will often say the original problem is coming back and increase their dose.'

She also says the differences between addiction to prescription and street drugs is rarely understood.

'Coming off tranquillisers is harder than stopping heroin. You can stop heroin in a few weeks. It can take months or years to come off benzodiazepines.'

A failure to understand the difference played havoc with the life of 47-year-old health and fitness trainer Lynn Parry-Jones. She spiralled into a serious depression two years ago after the death of a close friend and the break-up of a long-term relationship.

It was the beginning of what she describes as a 'descent into hell'.

She was first put on three drugs - an anti-depressant, lithium and one of the strongest benzodiazepines. But the trouble started when her doctors decided to take her off the benzodiazepine, saying it was addictive.

'But they did it very quickly over a few weeks, which I now know you should never do. I became hyper anxious, I thought of suicide constantly,' she says. 'But doctors said it was merely a sign of how ill I was.'

During the next 18 months, Lynn was in and out of hospital. At one point she was taken off all three drugs within five weeks. 'That was horrific,' is all she will say about it.

This was the state she was in when she went to see Pam Armstrong.

'With my GP she put me back on the drugs to reduce the stress my system was under. Then it took 11 months just to come off the tranquilliser - a little bit less every few days. There is no quick fix.

'It was still the hardest thing I've ever done but now I feel fantastic. But if it hadn't been for Pam's understanding, I'd probably be screaming in a locked ward.'

It's been suggested that one way to pay for greater help would be to impose a levy on pharmaceutical companies for addiction services.

This is the proposal of a parliamentary group that looks specifically at tranquilliser addiction.

'The gambling and alcohol industries provide services for the victims of their products,' says Jim Dobbin, the group's chairman, 'why not drug companies?'

However, the drug manufacturers believe the responsibility lies firmly with the doctors.

'When a side-effect becomes established, information is made available to doctors,' said a spokesperson for The Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry.

'It is then down to them to consider the benefits and risks before prescribing.'

• *CITA Helpline 0151 932 0102, www.backtolife.uk.com,
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