

From Anne Milton MP
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Public Health



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Debbie Abrahams MP
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25 AUG 2011

Dear Debbie

Thank you for your further letter of 28 July about addiction to benzodiazepines.

This is an important issue and one that I am keen that we address. The reports, which were commissioned by the Department of Health, reviewed the available prescribing data and found that there was an overall decrease in the prescribing of benzodiazepines over the last 19 years. The latest data from NHS prescribing services indicates that there were 11.4 million prescriptions for benzodiazepines in 2010, a decrease of 5,700 from the previous year.

The National Addiction Centre (NAC) report further investigated prescribing data by looking at a subset of patients who also had a prescription for opiate substitution therapy and it is within this specific cohort of patients where over a third of prescriptions were for more than eight weeks. Benzodiazepine use is common amongst illicit drug users and it is likely some patients receiving treatment for opiate dependence would receive prescriptions for longer than eight weeks as part of a longer tapered programme, as indicated for withdrawal within the British National Formulary (BNF) guidance.

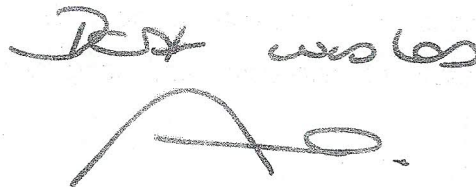
It was an oversight by the NAC not to have listed declarations of interest. The online copy of the NAC report has been updated to include John Strang's declaration of interests and declarations from the other authors will be added as soon as possible. Declarations of interest for all the authors are already available in other reports and articles that they have published elsewhere. While the omission of the declarations is unfortunate, the nature of the previous interests of the authors is not such as to invalidate the report.

Both of the addictions to medicines reports were peer reviewed ahead of publication to provide assurance that they were rigorous, authoritative documents. The reports provide a valuable insight into the issue of addiction to medicine.

As you are aware, I am convening a round-table meeting in September to look at what specific actions need to be taken forward to tackle addiction to medicines. Determining how best to support local areas to understand and respond to this issue is a key aim.

It is clear that we need to highlight good practice in treatment services and I agree with you that contributions from current practitioners and patients will be vital to the round-table discussion. I very much hope that Oldham Addiction Dependency Solutions will be represented.

Please do contact me again if there are any further concerns.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Anne Milton', written in a cursive style.

ANNE MILTON