

Tranquilliser Questions – Avoiding Answers

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Dawn Primarolo was appointed Minister of State for Public Health at the Department of Health in July 2007. In the letter below from February 1994 to Barry Haslam, benzo campaigner, David Blunkett MP, Shadow Secretary of State for Health made it clear that Dawn Primarolo had been interested in the plight of patients addicted to prescription tranquillisers.

24 February 1994

Dear Mr Haslam

Thank you for your recent letter regarding Benzodiazepine Tranquillisers.

Dawn Primarolo and myself have been taking up cases and have advised on how best the groups involved might organise a parliamentary lobby and keep attention on these issues.

We have also tried to assist through both Parliamentary Questions and raising the matter on the floor of the House, in pushing the Government to accept its own responsibilities and to take action now to ensure that it does not happen again.

This is something we will be returning to both in the House and in terms of our own future policy development.

I am passing your letter to Paul Boateng who, as the legal affairs spokesman, has specific responsibility for the litigation side of what is a national scandal.

See <http://www.benzo.org.uk/mpleters.htm>

The pertinent questions she asked on the subject were obtained recently by MP Jim Dobbin, chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Involuntary Tranquilliser Addiction at the House of Commons. They show that she was aware of the following:

- Tranquilliser addiction had a serious impact on health.
- Addicted patients when they were being treated were being treated in psychiatric hospitals.
- Children under the age of 16 were becoming addicted.
- That the Department of Health was not taking effective steps to curb prescribing.
- That funds were not being set aside to deal with the existing problem.
- That the 1988 Committee on the Safety of Medicines advice needed beefing up.
- That long term prescribing was continuing.
- That women and the elderly were being disproportionately affected.
- That withdrawal from tranquillisers was a lengthy process and had economic impact.
- That the role played by benzodiazepine manufacturers should be brought home to them and they should be asked to provide compensation for their victims.
- That medical schools were not warning about the dangers of over-prescribing.
- That the CSM guidelines were not effective.

Not all the questions below have the answers as yet, and they have been asked for, but where there are answers it is clear to see that the Department of Health and in two of them the Department of Social Security (now the Department of Work and Pensions) held little data, thereby demonstrating that for them at least prescribed tranquilliser addiction was not at all a serious problem.

Not a lot has changed over the years – the prescription levels have fallen but a great deal of over-prescribing still takes place and the slack has been taken up by Z drug and SSRI prescriptions. No-one has been compensated either by government or the drug companies. Withdrawal facilities are non-existent and the Department of Health

still believes psychiatric hospitals are appropriate. Today as part of its avoidance strategy, the department maintains that addicted patients are the same as those who get their drugs on the street.

You would think that having been appointed to the Department of Health as a minister overseeing public health, Dawn Primarolo would be more aware than any previous minister of the work that needs doing urgently. **However now that she answers questions rather than asking them, the usual rules are being followed and the usual lack of information is demonstrated:**

March 2008

Jim Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many of those previously addicted to prescribed tranquillisers have suffered long-term impairment as a consequence of their addiction.

Dawn Primarolo: The Department does not currently collect information that enables us to provide an estimate of the number of patients who are addicted to prescription drugs.

Questions asked in Parliament by Dawn Primarolo in the 1980s and 1990s

Primarolo, Dawn Written Parliamentary Question

Date of Answer:

02.03.1993

Question:

What steps DH is taking to ensure that benzodiazepine prescribing does not increase following the ending of the Roche case; what assessment DH has made of effect of measures to reduce benzodiazepine addiction since 1988; & what further measures are proposed; & how many prescriptions were issued for benzodiazepines in each year since 1989. -Inc figures.

Member Answering Question:

Mawhinney, Brian

Primarolo, Dawn Written Parliamentary Question

Date of Answer:

02.03.1993

Question:

What was (a) the total sum allocated for addiction problems and (b) the proportion of this allocated specifically to problems of benzodiazepine addiction (i) in 1988 and (ii) in 1992. -Inc figures.

Member Answering Question:

Mawhinney, Brian

Primarolo, Dawn Written Parliamentary Question

Date of Answer:

02.03.1993

Question:

What estimate she has of the number of people addicted to benzodiazepines as a proportion of all addicts in (a) 1988 and (b) 1992. -This information not currently available centrally.

Member Answering Question:

Mawhinney, Brian

Primarolo, Dawn Written Parliamentary Question

Date of Answer:

02.03.1993

Question:

What plans she has to ask the Committee on Safety of Medicines to change its advice to doctors as given in Bulletin 21 of January 1988 regarding the drugs Valium, Librium and Mogadon, following the ending of the Roche case.

Member Answering Question:

Mawhinney, Brian

Primarolo, Dawn Written Parliamentary Question

Date of Answer:

08.11.1989

Question:

To assess findings by Association of Community Health Councils for England & Wales published in "Health News Briefing -Benzodiazepines: A Suitable Case for Treatment", on numbers of people taking benzodiazepines & reasons for prescriptions being made.

Member Answering Question:

Bottomley, Virginia

Primarolo, Dawn Written Parliamentary Question

Date of Answer:

08.11.1989

Question:

To assess whether findings by Association of Community Health Councils for England & Wales suggest that inappropriate long-term prescribing of benzodiazepines comes to an end & as to whether benzodiazepine prescribing for women & elderly constitutes a disproportionate % of all benzodiazepine prescribing. -Includes ref to "British National Formulary" (in Library).

Member Answering Question:

Bottomley, Virginia

Primarolo, Dawn Written Parliamentary Question

Date of Answer:

21.07.1989

Question:

What research has been conducted into advisability of prescribing hypnotic benzodiazepines & benzodiazepine tranquillisers to children & what conclusions have been drawn relative to each.

Member Answering Question:

Freeman, Roger

Primarolo, Dawn Written Parliamentary Question

Date of Answer:

18.07.1989

Question:

What adverse reports have been received by the Committee on Safety of Medicines about the effect of benzodiazepines on patients. -Includes ref to bulletin "Current Problems" No. 3, No. 5 & No. 21 in Library.

Member Answering Question:

Mellor, David

Primarolo, Dawn Written Parliamentary Question

Date of Answer:

18.07.1989

Question:

What info DH has as to the most widely accepted medical assessment of the average withdrawal period from benzodiazepines. -Includes ref to "Guidelines of Good Clinical Practice in the Treatment of Drug Misuse" (copy in Library).

Member Answering Question:

Freeman, Roger

Primarolo, Dawn Written Parliamentary Question

Date of Answer:

18.07.1989

Question:

To estimate how many children under age of 16 years are addicted to benzodiazepines. -Not available.

Member Answering Question:

Mellor, David

Primarolo, Dawn Written Parliamentary Question

Date of Answer:

18.07.1989

Question:

To discuss with the leaders of the pharmaceutical industry the setting up of a compensation scheme for those people whose lives have been ruined or damaged by benzodiazepine addition. -No plans to do so.

Member Answering Question:

Mellor, David

Primarolo, Dawn Written Parliamentary Question

Date of Answer:

18.07.1989

Question:

If Dept of Health has sought to encourage the development of guidelines for the maximum recommended period for children under the age of 16 years to be prescribed benzodiazepines.

Member Answering Question:

Mellor, David

Primarolo, Dawn Written Parliamentary Question

Date of Answer:

18.07.1989

Question:

To take steps to reduce benzodiazepine prescriptions in the UK.

Member Answering Question:

Mellor, David

Primarolo, Dawn Written Parliamentary Question

Date of Answer:

12.04.1989

Question:

What steps Dept of Health intend to take following increase in no of prescriptions for benzodiazepines dispensed by community pharmacists in 1987. -(Holding answer 11 April 1989)

Member Answering Question:

Mellor, David

Primarolo, Dawn Written Parliamentary Question

Date of Answer:

12.04.1989

Question:

What figures are available showing trend of benzodiazepine prescriptions in 1988. -Includes table. (Holding answer 11 April 1989)

Member Answering Question:

Mellor, David

Primarolo, Dawn Written Parliamentary Question

Date of Answer:

12.04.1989

Question:

To introduce legislation to prevent prescription of benzodiazepines to children under age of 16 years. -(Holding answer 11 April 1989)

Member Answering Question:

Mellor, David

Primarolo, Dawn Written Parliamentary Question

Date of Answer:

12.04.1989

Question:

To estimate no of people put on benzodiazepines during 1988 who have taken them for longer than period advised by Committee on Safety of Medicines. -Not available centrally. (Holding answer 30 Jan 1989)

Member Answering Question:

Mellor, David

Primarolo, Dawn Written Parliamentary Question

Date of Answer:

12.04.1989

Question:

To commission Institute of Psychiatry to carry out research into no of children in UK addicted to benzodiazepines, no of adults in UK addicted to benzodiazepines, no of people placed in psychiatric hospitals in UK in order to withdraw from benzodiazepines & no of people on sick or invalidity benefit in UK following benzodiazepine withdrawal. -(Holding answer 11 April 1989)

Member Answering Question:

Mellor, David

Primarolo, Dawn Written Parliamentary Question

Date of Answer:

12.04.1989

Question:

To request Committee on Safety of Medicines to issue further advice to doctors in light of increase in prescriptions for benzodiazepines in 1987; what advice Committee on Safety of Medicines is issuing to doctors about prescription of

benzodiazepines to children; & to meet Committee on Safety of Medicines to discuss increase in benzodiazepine prescriptions in 1987. -Includes ref to Current Problems No 21, issued to all doctors in Jan 1988, copy in Library. (Holding answer 11 April 1989)

Member Answering Question:

Mellor, David

Primarolo, Dawn Written Parliamentary Question

Date of Answer:

11.04.1989

Question:

If there are any plans to introduce a compensation system for people whose lives have been damaged by benzodiazepine addiction. -No plans to do so.

Member Answering Question:

Freeman, Roger

Primarolo, Dawn Written Parliamentary Question

Date of Answer:

30.01.1989

Question:

How many working days were lost in 1987 as result of people withdrawing from benzodiazepines -Do not hold this information

Member Answering Question:

Mellor, David

Primarolo, Dawn Written Parliamentary Question

Date of Answer:

30.01.1989

Question:

How many people are at present withdrawing from benzodiazepines in psychiatric hospitals within NHS -Do not have this information centrally

Member Answering Question:

Mellor, David

Primarolo, Dawn Written Parliamentary Question

Date of Answer:

30.01.1989

Question:

How many people are at present receiving sick or invalidity benefit as a result of withdrawing from benzodiazepines. -This info is not held.

Answering Department:

Dept of Social Security

Member Answering Question:

Lloyd, Peter

Primarolo, Dawn Written Parliamentary Question

Date of Answer:

30.01.1989

Question:

Which medical schools are currently providing lectures alerting medical students to dangers of benzodiazepines.

Answering Department:

Dept of Education and Science

Member Answering Question:

Jackson, Robert

Primarolo, Dawn Written Parliamentary Question

Date of Answer:

30.01.1989

Question:

How many psychiatric hospitals within NHS have special units to enable people to withdraw from benzodiazepines - Do not hold this information centrally

Member Answering Question:

Mellor, David

Primarolo, Dawn Written Parliamentary Question

Date of Answer:

30.01.1989

Question:

What % of all prescriptions given in 1987 by NHS doctors was for benzodiazepines -Includes figure for no of & % of dispensed prescriptions for benzodiazepines

Member Answering Question:

Mellor, David

Primarolo, Dawn Written Parliamentary Question

Date of Answer:

30.01.1989

Question:

To give total no of children under age of 16 years currently being prescribed benzodiazepines -Do not collect this information centrally

Member Answering Question:

Mellor, David

Primarolo, Dawn Written Parliamentary Question

Date of Answer:

20.12.1988

Question:

Table giving no. of prescriptions for benzodiazepines dispensed by community pharmacists in each of the years 1983 to 1986. -(Holding answer 19 Dec 1988).

Member Answering Question:

Mellor, David

Primarolo, Dawn Written Parliamentary Question

Date of Answer:

19.12.1988

Question:

If chief medical officer has met representatives of medical profession to discuss benzodiazepine prescribing; what further action has been decided upon to reduce no of people taking benzodiazepines.

Member Answering Question:

Mellor, David

Primarolo, Dawn Written Parliamentary Question

Date of Answer:

19.12.1988

Question:

What funds will be allocated under central funding initiative to projects in catering specifically for benzodiazepine dependence in 1989-90.

Member Answering Question:

Mellor, David