

Dr Dai Lloyd AM
Chair, Health, Social Care and Sport Committee
National Assembly for Wales
Tŷ Hywel
Cardiff Bay
CF99 1NA

31 January 2018

Dear Dai

P-05-784 Prescription drug dependence and withdrawal – recognition and support

The Petitions Committee has been considering the following petition from Stevie Lewis, which was submitted with 213 signatures:

Petition text:

We call on the National Assembly for Wales to urge the Welsh Government to take action to appropriately recognise and effectively support individuals affected and harmed by prescribed drug dependence and withdrawal.

This petition has been set up to raise awareness of the plight of individuals in Wales who are affected by dependence on and withdrawal from prescribed antidepressants and benzodiazepines – and specifically to ask the Welsh Government to support the BMA's UK-wide call for action to provide timely and appropriate support for individuals affected.

The term "prescription drug dependence" refers specifically to the situation where, having taken their antidepressant or benzodiazepine medication exactly as prescribed by their doctor, patients find they are unable to stop because of the debilitating withdrawal effects. It is important to note here that addiction and dependence are related but different issues. Use of the term addiction implies pleasure seeking behaviour. Reporting of prescription drug dependence in the



media continues to allude to "misuse" and "addiction" as if the patient is responsible in some way for their own harm. This is far from the truth. There is no pleasure whatsoever in finding that if you try to reduce or stop your antidepressant, you suffer a wide range of physical and emotional disturbances, that for some people can be life limiting and, tragically, even life ending. Patients need formal acknowledgement, support and guidance to help them through their withdrawal journey and this currently does not exist.

Additional information:

The British Medical Association has recently highlighted the issue of prescribed drug dependence. In May 2017, they wrote: "Prescribing of psychoactive drugs is a major clinical activity and a key therapeutic tool for influencing the health of patients. But often their use can lead to a patient becoming dependent or suffering withdrawal symptoms. In the absence of robust data, we do not know the true scale and extent of the problem across the UK. However, the evidence and insight presented to us by many charity and support groups shows that it is substantial. It shows us that the 'lived experience' of patients using these medications is too often associated with devastating health and social harms. This represents a significant public health issue, one that is central to doctors' clinical role, and one that the medical profession has a clear responsibility to help address." Because the side effects, tolerance effects and withdrawal effects of these medicines are not medically recognised for what they are, when patients develop these related effects/symptoms they are often prescribed other medicines and then polypharmacy complicates the problems further.

Affected patients are finding themselves with vague diagnoses eg: 'medically unexplained symptoms' or 'functional/somatic system disorders'. These are essentially psychiatric diagnoses attributing various debilitating and disabling physical symptoms to patients' own anxiety, beliefs, etc. This has the effect of discounting, disempowering and demoralising these patients still further. If it cannot be acknowledged that patients can have sustained functional nervous system dysfunction and damage as a consequence of taking medicines 'as prescribed' (sometimes over many years), systemic medical learning and improvement is stifled and patients continue to be further harmed. Meanwhile the initial prescribing risks remain severely underestimated and misleading prescribing guidelines and 'best practice' advice is unchanged.



The Petitions Committee considered the petition most recently on the 23 January 2018 when Members agreed write to the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee to ask whether you have considered the issues raised by the petition in your recent work, or intend to consider them as part of any forthcoming inquiries.

You may wish to be aware that the Committee also agreed to seek the views of individuals affected, health boards, the British Medical Association and the Royal Pharmaceutical Society on the issues raised by the petition.

Further information about the petition, and the Committee's consideration of it to date, is available here:

<http://www.senedd.assembly.wales/mgIssueHistoryHome.aspx?Ild=19952>

I would be grateful if you could send your response by e-mail to the clerking team at SeneddPetitions@assembly.wales.

Yours sincerely



David J Rowlands AC/AM
Cadeirydd/ Chair

