



Department  
of Health

Rt Hon Alistair Burt MP  
Minister of State for Community and Social Care

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Catherine Mason  
HM Coroner for Leicester City and South Leicestershire  
The Town Hall, Town Hall Square  
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28 MAY 2015

*Dear Coroner,*

Thank you for your letter about the death of Brenda Leyland. I am responding as the Minister with responsibility for this area at the Department of Health.

I was saddened to learn of Mrs Leyland's death. Please pass my condolences to her family.

Your report gives details of Mrs Leyland's death and raises questions about progress in reducing the potential risk associated with helium. In particular, you noted the following:-

- *That helium gas is freely available in canisters and there appears to be no controlling measures on how many canisters can be bought by an individual.*
- *The size of the helium canisters are of large volume.*
- *There is no modified control valve attached to the canisters which would restrict the volume of gas being released.*

Having reviewed the response in the case of Matthew Satterthwaite, which was sent to HM Coroner Mr Nigel Meadows, I note that the examples given showed that even small amounts of helium can be sufficient to cause death, rendering controls on availability ineffective. This has led to a number of options to address the issues you raise being considered and discarded.

Work to consider the best way to respond to the increasing use of helium as a suicide method continues with our partners across government and beyond. Since helium

suicide became more common, we have been working with Samaritans, the British Compressed Gases Association and leading researchers, while involving colleagues across government from the Department for Business, Industry and Skills, Public Health England and the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

We have met the British Retail Consortium on several occasions and taken advice from the Royal College of Anaesthetists. There are however no specific outcomes to report at this time, although there is compelling evidence that reporting and portrayals of suicide in social and other media can lead to copycat behaviour, especially among young people and those already at risk. The Samaritans have produced guidelines intended to limit the further spread of both helium suicide and other novel methods.

These can be found at - <http://www.samaritans.org/media-centre/media-guidelines-reporting-suicide>.

There is a balance to be attained between ensuring that helium is available to those who wish to use it for its intended purpose of inflating balloons, while protecting those who wish to do otherwise.

I am keen that we all work together to find ways to prevent any more families suffering the loss of a loved one in this way. I believe this is a priority for the Department in my policy area and will do what I can to ensure this issue is successfully resolved. Thank you for bringing this matter to our attention. I hope that you find this response helpful.

*Yours faithfully*

A solid black rectangular box used to redact the signature of Alistair Burt.

**ALISTAIR BURT**