



Department
of Health &
Social Care

*From the Lord Bethell
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Innovation*

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Mr Guy Davies
HM Assistant Coroner, Cornwall & the Isles of Scilly
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Dear Mr Davies

Thank you for your letter of 7 May 2021 about the death of Helen Spicer. I am replying as Minister with responsibility for medicines.

Firstly, I would like to say how saddened I was to read of the circumstances of Helen Spicer's death and I offer my sincere condolences to her family and loved ones. The circumstances your report describes are very concerning and I am grateful to you for bringing these matters to my attention.

Decisions on the scheduling of controlled drugs under the relevant legislation are taken by the Home Office. This is done with the provision of advice from the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD) and any decisions made by the ACMD weigh up the risks of misuse, abuse and diversion, against not impeding legitimate use within healthcare.

I note that you have issued your report to the ACMD and am aware that it has responded to you directly on this matter. I can assure you that the Department of Health and Social Care, and its Arm's Length Bodies, work closely with the Home Office and the ACMD to help inform such decisions.

In relation to the wider context and the increasing concern internationally and here in the UK, about the overuse and misuse of opioids leading to a growing problem of dependence and addiction, I would like to outline the range of action that has been taken to protect patients from harm.

In 2017, the Government asked Public Health England (PHE) to conduct an evidence review to identify the scale, distribution and causes of prescription drug dependence, and what might be done to address it. PHE's report of the review was published in September 2019¹, providing evidence for dependence on, and withdrawal from, prescribed medicines, with the aim of making sure that local healthcare systems build awareness and support to enhance clinician and patient decision making.

In support of this, NHS England and NHS Improvement (NHSEI) is co-ordinating a programme to implement the recommendations of the review, working closely with relevant health system partners. The programme covers five classes of medicines including benzodiazepines; Z-drugs; gabapentinoids; opioids, for chronic non-cancer pain; and antidepressants.

The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) recently reviewed the risk of addiction and dependence with opioid medicines, as a result of which, all opioid medications now carry prominent front-of-pack warnings that the product contains opioids and may cause addiction. In addition, warnings on the risk of dependence in product information have been strengthened and harmonised. The MHRA has also worked closely with stakeholders and Trades Associations to develop an additional, user-tested, safety information leaflet for distribution directly to patients at pharmacies and on the MHRA government website.

Finally, since October 2020, Primary Care Networks of GPs have been required to identify and prioritise patients, including patients using potentially addictive pain management medication, who would benefit from a structured medication review². You may also wish to note that further to the February 2020 update to the GP contract agreement 2020/21 to 2023/24³, a Quality Improvement Module in the Quality and Outcomes Framework for general practice on preventing prescription drug dependency is in development.

I hope this response is helpful.



LORD BETHELL

¹ [Prescribed medicines review: summary - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/418117/prescribed-medicines-review-summary.pdf)

² [Report template - NHSI website \(england.nhs.uk\)](https://www.england.nhs.uk/quality-improvement/reports-and-templates/report-template/)

³ [Criteria for registration as a pharmacy technician in Great Britain \(england.nhs.uk\)](https://www.england.nhs.uk/quality-improvement/reports-and-templates/criteria-for-registration-as-a-pharmacy-technician-in-great-britain/)