

**Nicola Blackwood MP**

Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Public Health and Innovation  
Department of Health  
Richmond House  
79 Whitehall  
SW1A 2NS

24 October 2016

Dear Minister

**Supporting patients affected by prescribed drugs associated with dependence and withdrawal**

The British Medical Association (BMA) has taken a leading role in trying to identify what positive action is needed to support patients with dependency and withdrawal due to prescribed drugs. These patients suffer devastating health problems caused by prescribed drugs, such as benzodiazepines, z-drugs, opioids and antidepressants. We would like the government to play its part in providing this much needed support.

Antidepressant prescribing in the UK has more than doubled over the last decade, with over 70 million prescriptions dispensed in 2015 at a cost of over £340 million- this is a major public health issue. The provision of services for these patients is inconsistent across the country and it is clear that a national approach for services and guidance is needed.

Over the last three years, we have been working collaboratively with a wide range of stakeholders including the medical royal colleges, professional organisations and patient groups, to identify three key measures which we believe are vital to supporting affected individuals. These are:

**1. A national 24 hour helpline for prescribed drug dependence**

The introduction of a national 24 hour helpline for prescribed drug dependence would provide vital, real time support and could be implemented in a relatively short time frame. This national helpline would sit alongside a website and act as a single trusted resource for patients themselves to manage their drug dependence and also for doctors to signpost patients when they need crucial support.

**2. A national approach to specialised services for those patients suffering with dependence on prescribed drugs**

There are currently a small number of charity groups providing support but they cannot meet the vast demand. In the absence of specialist services, patients are often referred to general drug and alcohol services, which again have few resources or indeed the training or skills to manage prescribed dependence.



**3. Robust guidance on tapering and withdrawal management for psychoactive medications**

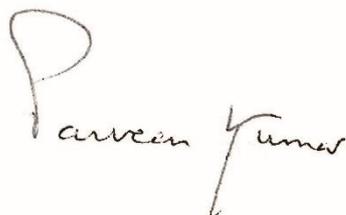
There is currently inadequate guidance in this area. NICE have recognised this is an issue and is considering the development of guidance on managing prescription medicines associated with dependence and withdrawal. It is vital that this guidance is developed and we would welcome any support you could offer in this area.

We fully acknowledge there is much more the medical profession could do to support these patients. To this end, we are working with key stakeholders to ensure doctors and medical students are adequately trained in managing the risks associated with prescribing psychoactive medications.

I would very much welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss our work, and to look ahead to plan what needs to be done next to support these patients. I attach a copy of the BMA's analysis report '*Prescribed drugs associated with dependence and withdrawal - building a consensus for action*', which provides more information on the work we have done so far on this important issue.

I would be grateful if your PA could kindly contact Susan Bahl, Senior Public Affairs Officer at the BMA on 020 3058 7457 to arrange an early meeting at your convenience.

With best wishes

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Parveen Kumar". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'P'.

**Professor Parveen Kumar CBE  
Chair, BMA Board of Science**