

PE1651/IIIIIII

The Chair of the British Medical Association Scottish Council of 28 May 2018

Thank you for your letter of 30 April seeking an update on the British Medical Association's calls for a prescription drugs helpline.

In our letter of 21 July 2017 to the Public Petitions Committee, we set out the reasons why we believe such a helpline and accompanying specialist support services would be of assistance to people who experience prescribed drug dependency or who suffer withdrawal symptoms and shared our previous correspondence with the Scottish Government on this issue.

While the Scottish Government has previously stated that resources cannot be made available for a dedicated helpline, the BMA's position remains unchanged and we continue to believe that a dedicated 24-hour helpline would be of benefit.

Since our last letter, the BMA gathered feedback in August 2017 from patients across the UK on their experience of currently existing phone and online support from the NHS, such as NHS 24 and NHS 111. The themes that consistently emerged were:

- Patients described a lack of expertise and general understanding of the symptoms of prescribed drug dependence and withdrawal.
- Rather than receiving specialist advice, patients were signposted to attend accident and emergency to receive further support, which was typically not appropriate for them.
- The systematic process of asking set-questions made patients feel like their specific symptoms or situation was not being heard and the service was not providing a sympathetic response.

While adequately resourced specialist support services also need to be provided, a dedicated helpline would help to address these issues and ensure that patients are directed to the support that is most appropriate for them.

During evidence to the Public Petitions Committee on 18 January 2018, the Scottish Government appeared to suggest that a helpline was not required as it is the prescriber's responsibility to manage a patient's withdrawal from medication. The ongoing responsibilities that prescribers have to their patients are not in question – the BMA has also called for revised guidance for doctors on safe prescribing, management and withdrawal of prescription drugs as well as better education and training - but the creation of a helpline would provide valuable additional support to patients with prescription drug dependency or withdrawal symptoms. This should be clearly understood as a supplement to ongoing care from prescribers, not a replacement.

In February 2018, Public Health England announced that it would carry out an independent review of dependence and addiction to prescription drugs. We hope that this will help to address the lack of robust data on prescription drug dependence and withdrawal symptoms and provide fresh impetus for Government action.