

To: Mental Health Trust Chief Pharmacists
Mental Health Trust Medical Directors

Professor Tim Kendall
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NHS England & NHS Improvement

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Cc: Regional MDs and Regional Pharmacists

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Dear Chief Pharmacist / Medical Director

**Follow up from coroner Regulation 28 report to prevent future deaths:
Benzodiazepines and suicide**

We are writing to ask you and your Chief Pharmacist/Medical Director to take a lead in raising awareness across your local health community of the potential risks of suicide associated with benzodiazepine prescribing and withdrawal.

You may be aware of the advice on best practice in the management of benzodiazepine withdrawal that is available through the National Institute of Health and Care Excellence (NICE) series of clinical knowledge summaries (CKS).

<https://cks.nice.org.uk/benzodiazepine-and-z-drug-withdrawal#!scenario>

The British Association for Psychopharmacology (BAP) comment paper, *Benzodiazepines: Risks and benefits. A reconsideration* published in the Journal of Psychopharmacology (2013: 27(11) 967–971) also contains useful guidance for prescribers: <https://www.bap.org.uk/docdetails.php?docID=77>

In line with this guidance, all patients who are receiving benzodiazepines for extended periods of time should be reviewed by their prescribers on a regular basis so that their suitability for long term prescribing can be assessed. In particular, attention should be paid to the relative risks of short and long acting benzodiazepines.

Guidance from the BAP reminds prescribers that they should always consider the potential for dependence or other harmful effects when prescribing benzodiazepines. Guidance recognises the importance of balancing the risks of dependence associated with long term use with the benefits of short or intermittent courses and the risks associated with the underlying condition for which treatment is being provided.

Although short or intermittent use of benzodiazepines would usually be considered to be best practice, the BAP guidance accepts that for a minority of patients longer term treatment may be appropriate. However, in all cases vigilance of potential hazards is required throughout the course of treatment.

Whilst the risks associated with benzodiazepine have been well known for many years, we are seeking your help in ensuring that all prescribers and pharmacists working in both primary and secondary care settings across your local health community are reminded of the need for vigilance when prescribing these medicines.

In particular we are asking you to work with your colleagues sitting on local prescribing/ medicines optimisation committees to highlight the importance of the following:

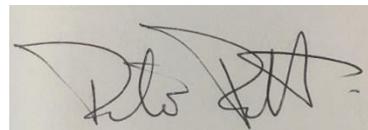
- 1) The need for regular and close monitoring of patients who are withdrawing from benzodiazepines;
- 2) The need to consider the particular risks associated with shorter acting benzodiazepines;
- 3) The existence and continued relevance of guidance from NICE and BAP on prescribing/withdrawal of benzodiazepines.

We are grateful for your cooperation with regards to this matter and for your efforts in supporting safer prescribing practices across your local health community.

Yours sincerely,



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