

# GBL/GHB addiction cases emerge in UK

EXCLUSIVE

Max Daly

Doctors are warning of the emergence of an increasing number of people seeking help for severe physical addiction to the Class C liquid solvent GHB and its legal precursor GBL.

Treatment services in Manchester, London, Lancashire, Yorkshire and Sussex have reported that in the last six months they have seen a growing number of people arriving at hospitals and detox services with what one doctor described as "horrible" dependencies. The phenomenon is so new there is no guidance for doctors on how to detox patients.

"I have not seen physical addiction like this with any other drug apart from alcohol," Dr Catherine Mueyba, a consultant psychiatrist at Manchester Drug Service (MDS), told *Druglink*.

"It is extremely difficult for people who are addicted to stop using GHB/GBL, because withdrawal can cause acute anxiety, psychosis, tremors and sweats. Some people need to wake up to drink it every two hours. And detoxing people from these drugs is highly dangerous."

Patients who have come forward with GHB/GBL dependencies are being treated with regular doses of benzodiazepines to stave off withdrawal. Some need to be given such high doses of anti-depressants that they have to be detoxed on hospital wards so they are near A&E.

The Manchester unit has detoxed at least six people with GHB/GBL dependence over the last six months, with zero cases before 2009. Dr Mueyba said some patients have had to postpone detox for several months because hospital beds cannot be found.

The addictions unit based at Lorraine Hewitt House in Lambeth has treated around ten GBL-dependent patients since March.

Dr Michael Kelleher, clinical lead for addiction in Lambeth, said most patients were young men taking between 0.5 and 2mls of GBL an hour.

Mark Allen, director of specialist services at the South London and Maudsley NHS Trust (SLaM), which runs mental health and substance misuse services in seven London boroughs, is so concerned with



the problem that he is setting up a specialist unit to deal with GHB and GBL addiction cases.

"We are seeing an increasing number of people presenting at our services with this problem. I am extremely concerned that we do not have a coordinated response to this because the drugs have such a very severe withdrawal."

GBL – which converts to GHB in the human gut – has been at the centre of media attention over the last three months after being linked to the death in April of 21-year-old medical student Hester Stewart. Her mother is calling on the government to make the drug illegal.

It is relatively cheap because it is legal and available on the 'grey' market over the internet. It costs around £35 for 250mls. It is sold in glass bottles because it would melt plastic bottles.

*Druglink* has learned that a man in his 30s, believed to have developed a long term addiction to GBL, died at his home in south London in the last week of June.

The substances' potential to become addictive over time, has until now, been dominated by its reputation as a recreational drug on the party scene, as a 'date rape' drug and confusingly as 'liquid ecstasy'.

Dr Mueyba warned: "I believe prevalence rates are higher than we think. There are a lot of people drinking GHB and GBL to dependent levels but they are have not been assessed. It is easy to become dependent on these drugs because people do not think they are addictive."

Those coming to the Manchester unit for help include a 20 year old taking GBL to supplement a prescription of antidepressants, a gym owner who used GHB for its rumoured anabolic properties and a sales executive in his mid-30s who used GHB to cope with a heavy workload and as an aphrodisiac.

## DRUGS QUOTE

**We're not just a fancy dress shop you know**

What magician's son and shop owner Paul Daniels Jnr told an undercover journalist after selling them a £20 bag of cannabis

**Regardless of how you try to explain to people it's a war on drugs or a war on a product, people see a war as a war on them**

Barack Obama's new drug czar Gil Kerlikowske says he wants to banish the idea that the US is fighting a 'war on drugs'

**Nice people take drugs**

Release's slogan on London buses, which sparked internet debate, was pulled after proving too controversial for bus companies.

**This was laziness brought about by excessive cannabis use**

Defence barrister for postman Neil Goddard who was jailed for failing to deliver thousands of letters because he was too stoned

**Arresting individuals and seizing drugs for their personal use is like pulling weeds – it needs to be done again the next day. The problem can only be solved by addressing the problem of slums and dereliction in our cities.**

UNODC boss Antonio Maria Costa calls for a shift of focus in the latest UN report on drugs