

PARTY POLITICS

Maryon Stewart could never have foreseen she would become embroiled in the future of British drug policy. And neither would she have chosen it. One Sunday lunchtime, in April 2009, she received a knock on the door. A police officer told her that her 21-year-old daughter, Hester, had died after taking the liquid solvent drug GBL.

She was devastated. Her initial shock on finding out GBL was legal soon turned to outrage when she found the government's drug advisers (ACMD) had already recommended it to be controlled. For reasons of bureaucratic inertia the advice had not been acted upon. This spurred her on to demand changes in the way dangerous drugs are dealt with by ministers and officials.

In her quest for some answers, Maryon, a former magistrate and a respected expert in alternative medicine, found herself drawn into the unfamiliar and at times anachronistic world of Whitehall, where she challenged ministers and officials demanding and gaining changes in the law and available information on drugs.

Between meetings with Alan Johnson (Home Secretary prior to the 2010 general election), James Brokenshire (current Drugs Minister), Ann Milton (Health Minister) and senior officials she established the Angelus Foundation, set up in memory of Hester, to prevent harms and reduce the risk from so-called 'legal highs'.

The Foundation's advisory board aims to deliver a new laboratory service on new synthetic drugs, a rapid response team profiling patterns of use and effects, schools education, family therapy for high risk groups and education videos for social media. The focus on education will target experimenters,



Tragedy: Mother, Maryon Stewart, has campaigned for change in drug policy since the death of her daughter

preventing them from becoming the problematic users of the future.

Maryon is still contending with officialdom, which she says does not always share her impatience for urgent change. Despite some positive results, she feels there is still a major disconnect between the knowledge of those in authority and the reality for young people.

Before you became involved, what was your impression of the world of drugs?

MS: It could be best summarised as blissfully unaware. I had four children and we had frank and honest conversations about drug use. Some had tried a few things, like smoked dope, but none were regular drug users. It was so long ago that I helped with drug addicts – I only remembered it when we were talking. When I was in my early 20s I did spend a short time helping out at rehab centre. I got involved because I met someone who worked there.

What spurred you to focus your campaign on politicians?

MS: I was shocked to find other countries, like the US, had banned it and had poster campaigns in nightclubs spelling out the dangers such as, 'GBL + Alcohol = Death'. My daughter was studying molecular medicine at Sussex University, well on her way to a First, she was an athlete training three times a week. There is no way she would have

taken something she knew was toxic – particularly alongside alcohol. My first reaction was I wanted to hold the Home Secretary (Jacqui Smith) to account for failing to act on the ACMD advice in. If Hester had known its harms, she would still be alive.

You managed to secure a meeting with the Home Secretary Alan Johnson personally. What was your first encounter with the minister and officials like?

MS: Alan Johnson met me a few times. I just remember there being loads of people round the table. I told him he could lay a Statutory Instrument (SI) and ban it in 72 hours. But I was incredibly disappointed as it was obvious he wasn't taking the ban forward at all. Alan Johnson said he couldn't lay the SI because GBL had legitimate uses and the chemical industry could sue him. I found it outrageous he could put the prospect of being sued above the well-being of young people. They did spend £200k on an advertising campaign during University Fresher's week. But I gave up a bit – it was like trying to push sand up a hill. I felt they were only doing things because if they didn't, there would be eight TV cameras outside the Home Office.

But you didn't leave it there. So what changed?

MS: I started working with the shadow cabinet. I was introduced to James Brokenshire and during several meetings came to realise it was a much bigger problem than a few certain substances and was a problem across several government departments. He got me meetings with officials in Health, Educational and Work and Pensions. By that time I realised every time you simply 'ban' a new drug there's something else ready to come onto the market. As soon as GBL became illegal (December 2009) suddenly people were all taking mephedrone. So just banning something is a total waste of time. I did some work with a researcher from Sky News who went undercover into a laboratory in China and found 400

substances coming from there alone. I thought, hang on a minute, how is dealing with the substances one-by-one going to work? It isn't.

You had some quick impact by getting Talk to Frank changed to include legal highs.

MS: Yes, thanks to my daughter Phoebe who also got Google to take down all the sites advertising GBL. At the time Hester died Phoebe told me the Talk to Frank website did not include information on GBL and other legal highs. When I asked them why, they said GBL did not fit into their remit as it was legal. I think that captures what we are trying to change. We are trying to establish a broader, more joined-up approach.

By then you had started to gather a group of experts to help you. How did that come about?

MS: I first met John Ramsey (Toxicologist and Director of the Tic Tac Communications drugs database at St George's Medical School in London). Discussions led from one thing to another and within three months I had the makings of a respectable group of advisers. The Angelus advisory board is made up of world class experts who until now have been working in isolation. Through me they have been given a voice to government. I mean, what is the point of being an expert if it isn't going to be used for the public good to protect young people?

Did your background as an expert in alternative medicine help you?

MS: I have looked at the problem with drugs in terms of nutrition and wellness. A lot of the problems of drug taking stem from family breakdown and peer pressure. Also, being called 'legal highs' doesn't help. Young people think legal means safe when it can mean paint stripper, plant food or a cocktail of Class B drugs mixed with chemicals. Parents have no idea, neither do educators, nor even the legislators.

What is your impression of how politicians see the 'legal highs' issue?

MS: I think they are embracing the situation as best they can, given the inadequate information they have so far. They are clearly constrained by a lack of budget, which is likely to affect how much they can physically do. I

am hoping that they will endorse our projects and give us some initial funding so that we can then appeal to the private sector for the rest of the funds required in order to take each project forward.

So what inspires you to keep at it?

MS: That shadowy chemists are tweaking the structure of drugs and making a fortune out of it. This is criminal behaviour and someone has got to take them on. I lost my daughter and I will do all I can to prevent it happening to somebody else. I feel like Hester and I are working together on this. People may call me kooky but that's how I feel about it. Doing something positive where there is such a need helps me cope with the loss of her.

How is Angelus going to make a difference?

MS: The government now sees us as a 'critical challenging friend'. Together we are looking at solutions, mainly in raising awareness of the risks and potential harms. We want to establish a Centre of Excellence in the testing of the substances which are being taken; we want to help families have honest conversations so young people can make better decisions.

I think ministers are listening to the message that investing in awareness now saves money in the long term. In the current economic climate we want to show preventing major harms is more efficient. For example, savings on ambulance call outs and emergency beds outs for drug and alcohol overdoses could save millions. It costs £250 per ambulance call out, £500 for a night in hospital and £3,000-4,000 for an intensive care bed per night. There are many on benefits who could be working because drugs took away their potential.

Should drug policy be linked with alcohol?

MS: Yes. I know a lot about how alcohol impairs people's decision-making, and we know young people tend to try drugs after they have had a few drinks. So increasing accessibility through extended licensing has been a disaster.

There is a strong message of harm reduction running through the Foundation's work.

MS: Yes. We are not so naïve to think we're going to stop young people taking drugs, but they need to know how the



Hester Stewart:
died after taking
GBL at a party

drug may affect their health: wreck their bladder, cause psychosis, make them depressed, give them a nosebleed or put them in a coffin. All young people have a right to know the harms before they snort or swallow.

Your focus has been on 'legal highs', but what are your thoughts on how the government enforce the law on more traditional drugs like cannabis, ecstasy and cocaine?

MS: I was a magistrate for four years. My personal view is I don't see the point of deploying resources on the law on possession of a drug and giving young people a criminal conviction. The government seem very constrained by rules and regulations. They are bringing the temporary ban on emerging substances, but that is going to take a whole year to implement. There must a quicker way and I'm not convinced it is the solution.

What are the next steps for Angelus's work?

MS: The website is up and running www.angelusfoundation.com and we are now seeking investment from government, charities, NGOs, trusts, philanthropists and National Lottery. We are urgently seeking funding for the education programme, to raise young people's awareness, because at the end of the day, that is what will make the difference.

■ **Jeremy Sare** is a freelance journalist and former secretary to the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs and head of drug legislation at the Home Office.