

OVERPRESCRIBING OF BENZODIAZEPINES: PROBLEMS AND RESOLUTIONS

Heather Ashton, Newcastle upon
Tyne, U.K.

DSM IV DEFINITION OF DRUG DEPENDENCE

Three or more criteria must be fulfilled:

(1) Withdrawal syndrome

(2) Drug tolerance; escalation of dosage

(3) Craving: strong desire or compulsion to take the drug

(4) Primacy of drug-taking behaviour over other activities

(5) Continued drug use despite harmful consequences

(6) Difficulty in controlling drug use

UNITED KINGDOM

1998 – Committee on Safety of Medicines –
bulletin to all doctors

- *Benzodiazepines are indicated for the short-term relief of anxiety or insomnia that is severe, disabling or subjecting the individual to unacceptable distress.*
- *Benzodiazepines can cause or exacerbate depression and increase the risk of suicide.*

1999 – UK Department of Health – *repeated same message*

2004 – Chief Medical Officer, Department of Health – *repeated same message*

CANADA

1992 – Health Canada

- *Continuous use of benzodiazepines should not exceed two weeks*

NEW ZEALAND

1989 – Department of Health

- *Short-term treatment with benzodiazepines may be beneficial but use for more than four weeks could well be harmful.*

DENMARK

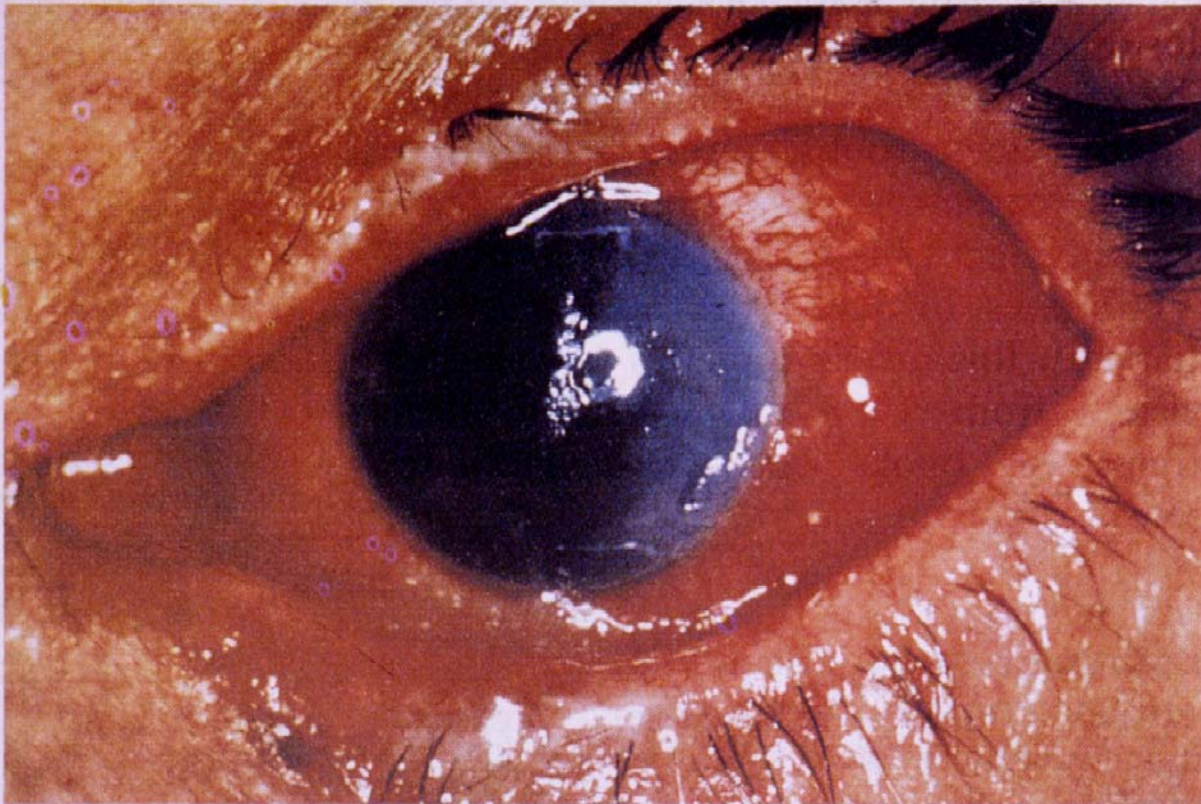
2004 – National Board of Health

- *Prescription of benzodiazepines should be restricted to a maximum of two weeks (sleeping pills) or four weeks (anxiolytics)*

IRELAND

2002 – Report of the Benzodiazepine Committee

- *Benzodiazepines should not be prescribed for more than one month for anxiety or more than 2-4 weeks for insomnia*



A man aged 40 who misused drugs and had had a leg amputated after ischaemic damage from intra-arterial injections presented with blindness of recent onset. He was blind in both eyes. The left eye was ophthalmoplegic, with corneal clouding and no pupillary reflexes. This was the result of his injecting gel temazepam into the inner canthus. This substance is known to cause vascular occlusion.

—J L THOMPSON, senior house officer in neurology, D HONEYBOURNE, consultant physician, R E FERNER, consultant physician, Dudley Road Hospital, Birmingham B18 7QH.

SOME STEPS NEEDED TO REDUCE BENZODIAZEPINE PRESCRIBING (1)

New Patients

- Short-term prescriptions (2-4 weeks only) in minimal dosage
- Avoid potent benzodiazepines (alprazolam, lorazepam, clonazepam)
- Consider rescheduling benzodiazepines
- Develop non-drug treatments for anxiety and insomnia with suitable training and provision of staff
- Educate doctors and health care workers about potential dangers of new drugs (e.g. Z drugs and others)

SOME STEPS NEEDED TO REDUCE BENZODIAZEPINE PRESCRIBING (2)

Long-term patients (already dependent)

- Educate doctors and health care workers in withdrawal methods
- Financial aid for patient support groups and dedicated withdrawal clinics

General measures

- Research into long-term effects of benzodiazepines
- Greater openness about results of drug-company sponsored clinical trials
- Keep up pressure on government health authorities and the public