

Painkillers and tranquillisers now kill more people than heroin and cocaine. How did Britain become so hooked? Jon Ungoed-Thomas investigates

Eight years ago Kerry Novis, 18, went to see her GP complaining of crippling back pain. She walked out of the surgery with a prescription for tramadol, one of the most effective painkillers.

Tramadol is considered a wonder drug by many who take it. It provides relief by blocking pain signals travelling between the nerves and the brain and can induce a feeling of euphoria.

Novis, who was living with her husband in a two-bedroom flat in St Leonards-on-Sea, East Sussex, relished the effects. Soon she was back in the surgery for repeat prescriptions.

The desire for tramadol started to take over her life. She would hoard the pills, taking a handful in the evening for her "hit". She would supplement them with oxycodone, another opiate-like painkiller.

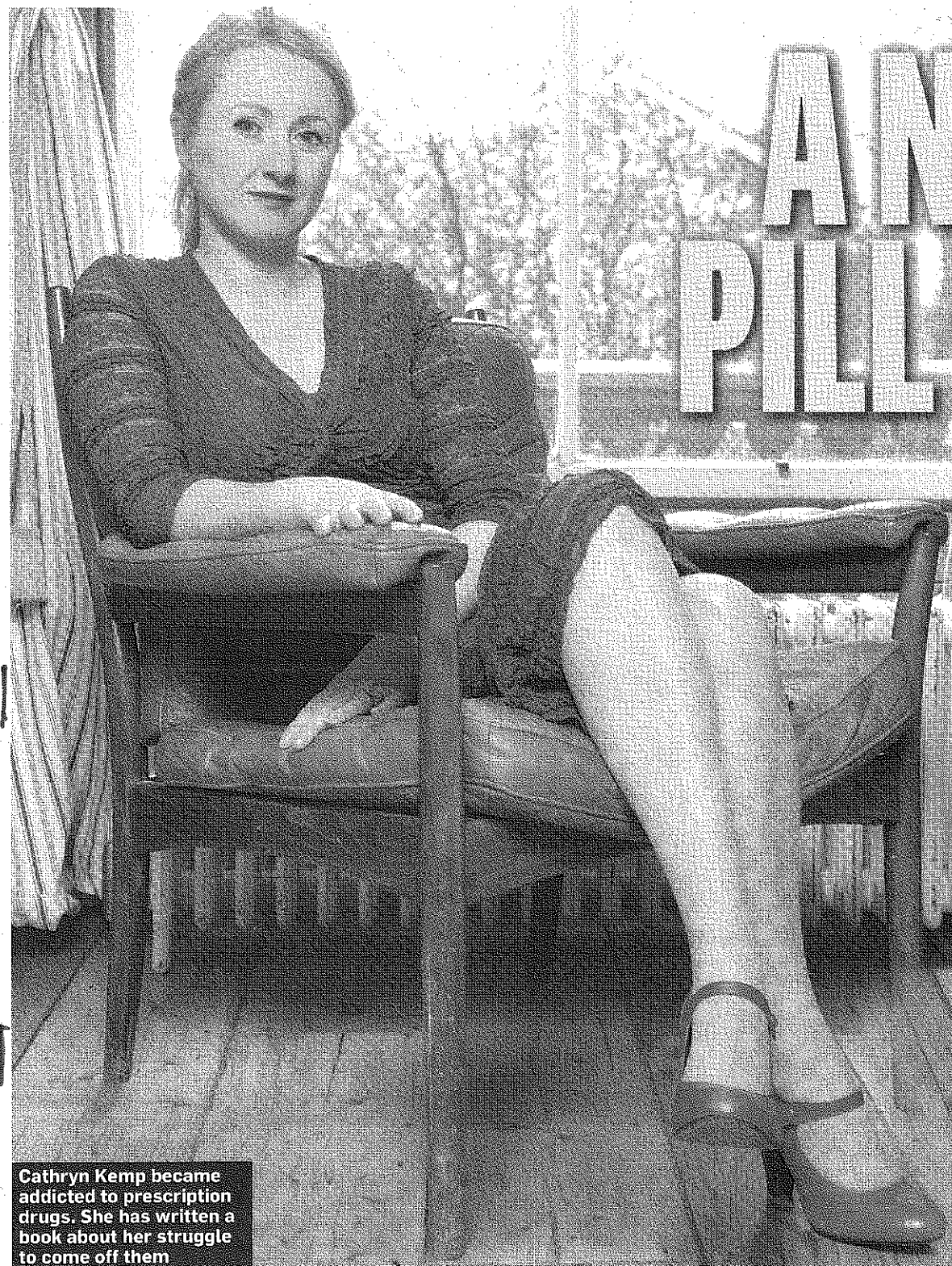
On February 13 Novis was found unconscious by James, her husband. Paramedics were called but could not save her. She was 25 years old. A coroner found that she had been killed by her dependence on the prescription drugs.

James Novis, 31, said last week that he wanted to alert others to the dangers. He called for more warnings from GPs about the risks of "prescription addiction" and said there should have been more support for his wife.

"I miss her every day of the week and I will always blame the doctors for it," he said.

"She died because of medication, so why didn't they have regular check-ups? Something needs to be done with people getting prescribed these tablets and getting addicted to them... They give them out so fast."

Kerry Novis is one of a growing number of victims of addiction to prescription drugs.



Cathryn Kemp became addicted to prescription drugs. She has written a book about her struggle to come off them

There doesn't seem to be that much help and support or information for GPs. In the end he cut me off," she said.

In 2010 Kemp sold her house to pay for rehabilitation in a private clinic. By now her consumption of fentanyl lozenges

had risen to 60 a day. "When I got into rehab, they said, 'You are an intelligent woman, why didn't you realise what you were taking?' I just trusted the hospital and trusted the GP. They said, 'Well, basically you are a heroin addict,'" she said.

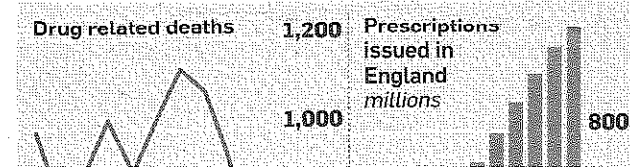
A chart helped her to keep track as she cut her intake by two or three lozenges a day but she suffered appalling withdrawal symptoms.

"It was absolutely horrendous," she said. "I had hallucinations, panic attacks and vomiting. It was very severe."

In the end, however, she emerged from the programme drug-free.

Kemp, who has written a book, *Painkiller Addict: From Wreckage to Redemption*, about her ordeal, said her experience had encouraged

A NATION OF PILL POPPERS



diazepines were given out in vast numbers and doctors should have known better."

CAMPAIGNERS highlighting the risks of benzodiazepine dependency are concerned that the huge numbers of antidepressants being prescribed may be another disaster in the making.

Some users trying antidepressants such as Prozac have complained of unpleasant

side effects including nausea, fatigue and chills.

The Sunday Times revealed last month that 11,000 women had been admitted to hospital in 2011-12 for antidepressant poisoning. This compared with 243 female patients admitted for heroin poisoning and 186 for the effects of cocaine.

Over the past decade the number of prescriptions issued each year has increased by more than 60%. There were

961.5m handed out in 2011 at a cost of £8.8bn.

Health experts say the risk of addiction to prescription drugs should be low if they are properly prescribed and taken. The worry is that some of the most popular have not been properly administered.

Dr Cathy Stannard, a consultant in pain management at Frenchay Hospital, Bristol, said prescriptions of strong painkillers — which have

increased fourfold since 1991 — had been given to patients too often and in doses that were far too large.

"I see patients who are prescribed maybe 20 or 30 times what you would think would be a safe and effective dose," she said.

Benzodiazepines, which official advice says should be used for only up to four weeks, have also been overprescribed. A report by the National Addiction Centre at King's College London, published in 2011, found that a third of prescriptions for benzodiazepines from 1990 onwards were for more than eight weeks.

Jim Dobbin, the Labour MP and chairman of the all party group on involuntary tranquilliser addiction, said the government had been complacent. Urgent action was needed to help patients who had unwittingly become dependent on prescription drugs.

"Lives are being destroyed and people are being left without the help and support they need," he said. "The government has refused to accept the scale of the problem."

Heather Ashton, emeritus professor of clinical psychopharmacology at the University of Newcastle, who has highlighted the toll of dependency on benzodiazepine, warned that the support services provided by a small number of "courageous charities" were also inadequate.

The Department of Health denied that it had been complacent, saying it had endorsed an agreement earlier this year by the medical professional bodies on how to address addiction. The measures included stricter adherence to the guidance on prescription.

The Royal College of GPs said prescribing standards "in the main" were extremely high and trainees would be tested on their competence in medicine management.

Tighter restrictions may help, but part of the problem is the readiness of GPs and patients to turn to the medicine cabinet as a cure or palliative for every physical and mental ailment.

Des Spence, a Glasgow GP, said: "There has been this rising culture of intervention with medication — whether it is depression or anxiety or pain — and I think it can be very unhelpful. It can erode people's sense of wellbeing. The cure of these things is not necessarily in the gift of medicine."

Additional reporting:
Harriet Cawley