

becoming a drug addict.

Patients are not just hooked on painkillers. It is estimated that up to 1.5m people are chronically dependent on benzodiazepine tranquillisers, once regarded as a panacea for anxiety and agitation.

New figures from the Office for National Statistics reveal that more people die after taking strong painkillers and benzodiazepines than from heroin and cocaine. Last year 807 people died after taking tranquillisers, tramadol and other strong painkillers, compared with 718 who succumbed to heroin and cocaine.

Tramadol alone was involved in 175 deaths in 2012, up from 83 in 2008. More than 7.4m prescriptions for it are issued each year.

Now that it is being linked to more deaths than cocaine, the government is consulting on whether to classify it as a class C drug.

How did we become a nation of pill poppers and why has not more been done to help them?

CATHRYN KEMP, 42, a journalist and author of *Lonely Planet* travel guides, said it seemed like "unknown territory" for her GP when she became addicted to fentanyl, another powerful painkiller.

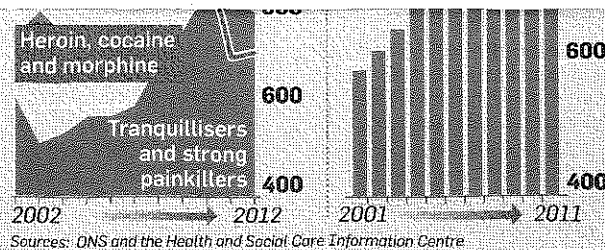
Kemp, who was living near Brighton when she fell ill with pancreatitis, was given the drug after being treated in hospital in 2007. The fentanyl — 50 times as potent as heroin — was a welcome relief but there were scant warnings about the risk of dependency.

"The pain was like being eaten alive and it was the first medicine that took it away. It was like sinking into a lovely warm bath," she said.

"I was fighting a daily battle against pain and I found something that helped me in that battle. It took only a few months before I crossed that line between keeping to my prescription and taking more. I ended up on something I could just not get off."

Kemp had been given a prescription of eight lozenges a day, but was soon increasing the dose. By the end of 2009 she was taking up to 45 a day. Her GP repeatedly confronted her about the addiction but kept writing the prescriptions.

"My GP was trying to get me to the point that I would realise I was an addict and we were both in unknown territory.



A comfort in my agony

CAMILLA CAVENDISH



I was prescribed tramadol four years ago, and have never been so grateful for anything as that little pill. I remember lying prostrate on the sofa, where my husband had gently put me — I was in too much pain to climb the stairs. He put on the Brandenburg Concertos while he ran to the chemist to get the first dose: Bach will always remind me of the gradual, delicious swooshing as the pain receded.

It had all started a week after I gave birth to my third child. I had suffered some kind of nerve damage and by the third week the pain was indescribable. I never knew when the waves of pain were going to start, or how long they would last, and normal painkillers were absolutely powerless. I could not even get down the stairs without triggering an attack that would leave me sobbing. It was traumatic for everyone, including the new baby and my husband.

I called the midwives at the hospital but they just told me to pop a paracetamol. It was only when I staggered into the doctor's office on my husband's arm, and had an attack right in front of him, that he prescribed tramadol. I entered a golden haze. I sometimes

tell my youngest son about that wonderful summer, when the sun always shone and I would sit with him and gaze out at a lamp across the street that I felt was an object of exquisite beauty.

The drugs conquered the pain (I was taking another drug as well as tramadol), but they sent me into a sort of premature senility. I would take telephone messages and write everything down wrong. I couldn't even recall which kind friend had called to say they were coming round to keep an eye on me. Most alarming. I was not always sure what pills I had taken. I forced myself to make a chart in the notebook on my bedside table and to tick off each pill as I swallowed it. I now understand how people can accidentally overdose.

Coming off tramadol four months later was grim. The glorious summer faded into the reality of an English winter. But I am deeply grateful to the professionals who prescribed it.

I carried a packet of tramadol in my handbag for a year after I recovered, as a kind of talisman against the terror of the pain returning. You cannot weigh up the pros and cons of a drug like this unless you have been in chronic, unimaginable pain.

ence on prescription drugs.

"There are so many people who are on sleeping pills, anti-depressants, tranquillisers and strong painkillers. We are a medicated nation," she said.

In America prescription pill addiction has become an epidemic, killing 16,000 people a year. The victims include Anna Nicole Smith, the model who died of an overdose in 2007, the actor Heath Ledger, who died from a prescription drug overdose in 2008, and Michael Jackson, who died in 2009.

The singer Robbie Williams said in an interview in 2009 that he became dependent on Vicodin, a strong painkiller.

There are no reliable figures for prescription pill addicts in the UK. Drug clinics say only a small proportion of those who seek their help are addicted mainly to pharmaceutical drugs. Many are reluctant to approach clinics that focus on illegal drug use.

GPs' records have been studied to assess the number of benzodiazepine users. The estimate of at least 1m has been extrapolated from these figures. The withdrawal symptoms from benzodiazepines include insomnia, depression, confusion and fits.

Diana Holdsworth, 51, who lives near Barnsley, South Yorkshire, said she had been prescribed diazepam for more than 13 years and finally managed to get off the drug in 2004. She overcame her dependency with the help of advice she found on the internet.

"When I realised other people were going through the same suffering as I was, I realised I was not mad," she said. "The drug wrecked my life."

Barry Haslam, 70, from Oldham, Greater Manchester, who was addicted to benzodiazepines for more than a decade and now runs a support group, said it was a "disgrace" that hundreds of millions of pounds were allocated for alcoholics and users of illegal drugs, but there was limited help for those who were addicted to prescription pills.

"There are drugs like benzodiazepines, which you should only be on for two to four weeks, and there are people who have been on them for 10 years or longer. There is total apathy from the government," he said.

"There are years of my life I cannot remember because I was on these drugs. Benzo-