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Only Scotland Edition **£1**

Friday August 24 2012 | thetimes.co.uk | No 70660

Max 20C, min 7C



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New Column

# Addicts on methadone 'risk brain damage'

Treatment policy under scrutiny after warning

Hamish Macdonell

Scotland's long-term policy of "parking" drug addicts on methadone was last night coming under fresh scrutiny after the head of one of the country's leading addiction treatment centres warned that use of the heroin substitute could cause brain damage.

Peter McCann, the owner and chairman of Castle Craig Hospital, in the Borders, said there was now clear evidence that the heroin substitute — which is prescribed to more than 20,000 addicts in Scotland — could cause serious side effects, including

### Methadone has become a menace

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brain damage. Yet Mr McCann gave warning that many of the thousands of addicts who are left on methadone for years are neither told about the dangers nor given the chance to come off the drug.

"This is a very short-term and short-sighted policy," Mr McCann declared.

His warnings represent the latest in a series of damaging blows to Scotland's methadone programme. Heroin addicts all over the country are offered methadone as a way of weaning them off heroin, only to find that they are instead hooked on the legally prescribed substitute with little chance of

being able to come off of it. There has been growing condemnation of the programme that "parks" addicts on methadone indefinitely — opposition that was fuelled by statistics released last week showing that methadone had been linked to almost half of Scotland's drug deaths last year. A total of 275 deaths were linked to methadone in 2011, with heroin or morphine linked to 206.

It was then revealed that the methadone programme — which provides 22,000 patients with the drug legally from pharmacies and paid for by the taxpayer — represents a £36 million cost to the nation each year.

Castle Craig Hospital is the largest free-standing centre for addiction treatment in the UK.

Mr McCann has been running the facility for 24 years and has seen many patients come for treatment for addiction to methadone.

Yesterday he referred to a series of international studies showing the side effects of the drug. One recent study from the Norwegian Institute of Public Health found that prolonged exposure to methadone can cause cell damage in the brain.

Further studies have found that methadone can cause cognitive impairment while others have linked the heroin substitute to osteoporosis and even cardiac problems.

Mr McCann said: "Methadone is a more addictive substance than heroin. It is supposed to be safer but there are

Continued on page 9, col 1



Nur Nadir vowed at the Old Bailey yesterday to stay in Britain to seek the release of her husband, Asil, sentenced for plundering his Polly Peck empire News, page 3

## We fight on, says wife of tycoon jailed for 10 years

## Scandal of soldiers denied a pension

Deborah Haynes Defence Editor

The families of long-serving Army officers have urged the Defence Secretary to reverse a decision that will cost them hundreds of thousands of pounds in lost pensions.

Relatives want the Government to review the military's redundancy scheme after their loved ones were laid off months before becoming eligible for an immediate payment.

The Times can reveal that Philip Hammond had to write last week to the chairman of the Defence Select Committee after giving incorrect evidence on the matter.

He told MPs this summer that the amount of time an officer must serve to qualify for a pension had been cut by a year. This is true only for someone who had joined the military at 18. Most officers sign up in their 20s.

### 'I felt ashamed of my husband's treatment'

News, page 8

The group, calling themselves the "Unpensionables", pounced on the error as a sign that Mr Hammond may not understand the effect of sacking an officer just before the immediate pension point of 15 years. "Devastated, insulted and complete disbelief," one Army wife said, summing up her emotions. "It was not just the implementation of a policy, it was a complete betrayal."

Jayne Bullock, 48, whose brother is a major with a wife and three children under the age of 5, began the campaign. Pension Justice for Troops, after he was made redundant in June, only 82 days shy of the 16-year mark. The relatives are speaking out because all of the officers are still serving and cannot talk publicly. "I was shocked. He will have no job, no house and no pension," Ms Bullock, a retired teacher from South London, said.

Her brother was among 3,000 Continued on page 8, col 4

### IN THE NEWS

#### Judgment on Breivik

Anders Behring Breivik learns today if he is to be sent to prison or declared insane. Three quarters of Norwegians want him to serve a life term for the 77 murders committed last year. News, pages 6, 7

#### Double exposure

The celebrity news website TMZ that published pictures of a naked Prince Harry said that more images of the Las Vegas pool party may emerge. News, pages 16, 17

#### Special forces poised

Western special forces, including troops from France and the US, are poised along the borders of Syria to destroy the country's chemical weapons if the Assad regime collapses. World, page 33

#### Hearts stay proud

It was rotten luck for Hearts when an own goal handed victory to Liverpool at Tynecastle. But the Scottish side can hold their heads high, after giving as good as they got. Sport, page 84

#### Headline



#### Inside today

bricks&mortar Why period is losing its charm Pages 56, 57



# Methadone addicts 'risk brain damage'

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number of side effects that are not made known to the patients when they are introduced to methadone.

"It's known that it causes cognitive impairment taken over time. It is affecting the brains of patients who take it for a long time ... they develop a lack of judgement."

Mr McCann said that while the damage to cognitive functions could be repaired over time, this would only happen if the patient came off methadone and many addicts are parked on it permanently.

He added: "Ethically, the doctor should warn patients of the side effects when they start the treatment but, in many cases, the patients are not getting that advice.

"If they are on methadone for a long period of time, they should be getting warnings at regular intervals and should be given the opportunity of alternative treatments but that is not happening."

Mr McCann said it made more sense for the health service to fund more abstinence-based treatment places, rather than just to leave addicts on methadone and face a larger bill for treatment later on.

"What is happening in the Netherlands is that people are becoming pre-



HEMEDIA / SWINS GROUP

**“ Ethically, the doctor should warn patients of the side effects, but patients are not getting that advice ”**

Peter McCann

maturely senile on methadone and they are having to be put into care homes before they should be," he said.

And he added: "More facilities could be created, they can be cheap and cheerful treatment centres, without luxury, they can be easily created."

Ruth Davidson, the leader of the Scottish Conservatives, reacted to Mr McCann's warnings by calling on the Scottish government to rethink its methadone strategy.

She said: "Methadone was only ever supposed to be a stepping stone to recovery, not for people to be parked on it and forgotten about.

"But for years now people have not been getting their doses reduced, and this is costing far too much both in lives and taxpayers' money.

"We must make it a priority to get people off methadone as soon as possible, to ensure they have the best chance of making a full recovery."

A Scottish government spokesperson said: "Decisions around the most appropriate form of treatment is for doctors to agree, in consultation with their patient with a focus on their sustained recovery. There are national prescribing guidelines which clinicians must take account of when prescribing such treatments."

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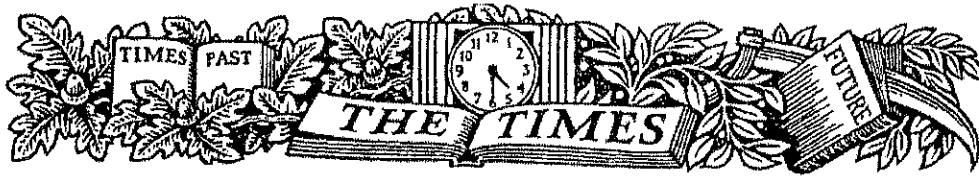


Methadone is taken by 22,000 Scots

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**Leading articles**


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# The Wrong Remedy

Methadone has become a menace in Scotland, as harmful as some of the drugs it seeks to supplant. New thinking is urgently needed

Ever since its development as a painkiller in the 1930s, methadone has been seen as a useful medical tool, not least as a means of weaning drug addicts off their dependency. When it is used properly, doctors have seen it as an alternative to the agonies of instant withdrawal, stabilising patients, blocking the euphoric effects of heroin or morphine, and gradually reducing or even stopping altogether their reliance on hard drugs.

Over the years, however, the methadone programme has turned into a lazy, expensive and potentially harmful alternative to the drugs it is meant to be combating. So widespread has its use become that it is now widely seen as an addictive drug in itself, one that costs the Government some £36 million a year and is responsible for more deaths than the substances it is intended to replace. Of the 584 deaths recorded in the General Register of Scotland's figures last year, heroin or morphine was implicated in 206 deaths while the figure for methadone was 275 — up from 174 in 2010.

Now, as *The Times* reveals today, it may also be having long-term effects that include cell damage in the brain, with the additional risk of osteoporosis and cardiac impairment. The benefits that methadone offers have, it seems, been overtaken

by the serious drawbacks of a treatment that, for too long, has been an easy option for doctors. Used on its own, and without regular supervision and counselling, it appears to be every bit as addictive as heroin.

The new reports that raise questions about its long-term effect should finally prompt a proper debate about the alternatives. The Scottish Tory party deserves credit for raising what is not a popular issue and continuing to draw attention to it over the years. As its leader, Ruth Davidson, puts it, methadone has become "little more than legalised drug-taking on an industrial scale".

Scotland has an honourable track record in tackling drugs and the problems they bring in their wake. In the 1960s, when Edinburgh was at risk of becoming the "Aids capital of Europe", a clean-needle programme was instrumental in stopping the disease in its tracks. An approach at least as imaginative as this is now required.

The drug treatment world is itself divided about the best approach. Those like the comedian Russell Brand, who urge "total abstinence", say that treatments that prescribe a gradual approach rarely work. Others insist that it is simply unrealistic to expect addicts, whose lifestyle is often chaotic, to kick the habit with-

out the medical back-up required to make it work.

The reason that governments have shied away from the methadone problem is that the alternatives can be even more expensive. Weaning addicts off drugs with the proper supervision and therapy that necessarily go with it is a long, time-consuming and not always successful process. But we cannot shy away from what is in danger of becoming a national scandal. Scotland's drug problem is growing, the number of deaths associated with it continue to rise, and now we learn that the prescribed treatment is itself contributing to the nation's appalling health record.

Those who oppose the use of methadone argue that the only alternative is abstinence: persuading addicts to give up drugs altogether. This is easy to say, far from easy to deliver. What is probably more achievable in the short term is to reassess the way that methadone is used and to lay down strict guidelines about its prescription, insisting that patients use it only if accompanied by regular supervision, counselling and assessments by doctors. Methadone can only be justified if it is a stepping-stone to weaning addicts off their dependency. There is no point in prescribing a treatment that becomes as pernicious as the drugs it is intended to treat.