

## **PE1651/KKK**

Tabitha Dow submission of 5 January 2018

Having achieved a 2:1 degree from Manchester University, UK, in Psychology, I lived the life of a normal, outgoing young professional in London. I worked at the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience, as a Psychology Research Assistant, and I rented a flat in Earlsfield in South West London. My health became compromised when gradually, my migraines, which I had experienced since childhood, became more regular and more severe. After seeking medical support for this ongoing illness at The National Migraine Centre, London, in 2014, (when I was 29), I was advised to take the antidepressant Venlafaxine at a maximum dose of 150mg. The Neurologist advised me that Venlafaxine could help with my migraines and low mood. This was the start of my downfall.

Neither the Neurologist, nor the GP who subsequently prescribed the drug, explained that it was extremely chemically addictive. I was not told how long to take it for, it was prescribed indefinitely, and there was no mention that coming off the drug would likely result in severe withdrawal symptoms and a need to taper off like you would heroin. Neither mentioned that one of the common withdrawal effects of Venlafaxine are migraines. The NICE guidelines for taking Venlafaxine are also inaccurate. The guidelines state: "Before prescribing venlafaxine, practitioners should take into account its higher propensity for discontinuation/withdrawal symptoms if stopped abruptly, its toxicity in overdose and its higher cost." This statement fails to mention that Venlafaxine can also cause withdrawal symptoms when not stopped abruptly and in accordance with GPs tapering guidelines

I began tapering off Venlafaxine in 2015 after being on it for a year, as it had not helped improve my low mood. I followed my GP's tapering instructions, but I had to abandon the taper at 50mg because I experienced severe and disabling withdrawal symptoms. The migraines increased dramatically and on top of these I developed intense crushing pressure in my forehead which was constant and unbearable for months. I also experienced chronic fatigue, internal tremors, startling easily, sensitivity to light and sound, sensory overload, anger, brain zaps, pressure behind my eyes, tired eyes, extreme fear, panic, confusion, being unable to speak, being unable to move, my brain feeling sick, my heart beating fast when I stood up, mental turmoil, night terrors, hypnagogic hallucinations, night sweats, gasping in my sleep, feeling unwell after a bath/shower, severe difficulty waking up in the morning, feeling drowsy and 'stuck' until several hours after waking, feeling drugged and toxic after napping and sleeping, a sensation of my brain moving from side-to-side, squeezing/tight sensation inside my head, right eye-brow pulling upwards, a chemical 'metally' sensation in my forehead, vibrating and electrical sensation in my head, being unable to cope with everyday tasks, deterioration in mood, agitation, feeling like my brain was shutting down, light-headed when I stood up, feeling like my body was rocking as if on a boat, feeling catatonic, scrambled thinking, feeling as if there was a block in my thinking, difficulty planning, difficulty carrying out sequential tasks, and feeling detached from my environment. I sought help from my gp for these symptoms, unaware at the time that they were caused by withdrawal from Venlafaxine. When all my test results came back normal he showed no interest in helping me further, and I was left to cope alone. I had to stop working and I moved

back home to my parents' house, so they could look after me. I lost the vibrant London life that I used to lead.

Whilst chatting to someone in a migraine Facebook support group they suggested that I join another support group for Venlafaxine withdrawal symptoms. It wasn't until I joined this group and saw that there were hundreds of people in the group all experiencing the same symptoms as me, that I realised that my symptoms were caused by Venlafaxine withdrawal. I told two GPs that I was experiencing withdrawal symptoms from Venlafaxine. One didn't comment but agreed to refer me to see Dr Healy, the other disagreed even once I had written evidence from Dr Healy. Two years later I still continue to be debilitated by many of these symptoms on a daily basis and am unable to work. I am now receiving PIP and ESA benefits.

Most Drs don't recognise the side effects and withdrawal effects from antidepressants, and instead assume that they are as a result of the original mental illness reoccurring. I saw a Dr who worked in Neuro-psychiatry at The Maudsley Hospital in London who had never seen anyone with such unusual withdrawal symptoms lasting for as long as mine. He was clinical and ambivalent when I told him how I had been disabled by Venlafaxine. He said that symptoms such as "feeling like my brain was moving from side-to-side" were hard to imagine, because he had never heard of such a bizarre sensation. He couldn't offer any explanations for my symptoms. He offered me CBT for 'functional disorder' symptoms which he admitted had never been used to help anyone with side-effects from antidepressants. He agreed with me that there isn't a specialist service for people like me experiencing withdrawal symptoms.

I saw Dr Healy who diagnosed me with "dependence on and withdrawal from Venlafaxine". He is the only NHS Dr who has validated my withdrawal symptoms. However he was unable to offer any solutions about how to recover. In fact he said that some people don't ever manage to come off antidepressants because of the crippling withdrawal symptoms which wasn't very hopeful.

Desperate to not be one of these people stuck on antidepressant medication forever I've spent hours of time researching online and chatting to fellow sufferers in the Facebook support groups about how antidepressants affect biochemical processes in the body, and alternative therapies to alleviate the symptoms. I've devised my own tapering plan, independent of my Drs who don't know how to taper me off Venlafaxine. I'm also seeking help for my withdrawal symptoms from alternative therapies which I pay for myself. This has been and continues to be a huge financial burden.

Taking Venlafaxine has ruined my life; I've lost my income, my social life and my independence. My health is now worse than it was before I took Venlafaxine. Whilst my friends are reaching the normal milestones for a healthy woman of my age i.e. marriage and progressing with their careers, my future is uncertain.