



Department
of Health &
Social Care

From Jackie Doyle-Price MP
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Mental Health,
Inequalities and Suicide Prevention

39 Victoria Street
London
SW1H 0EU

020 7210 4850

Your Ref: 10686
Our Ref: PFD-1178625

Ms Maria Voisin
HM Senior Coroner, Avon
HM Coroner's Court
The Courthouse
Old Weston Road
Flax Bourton BS48 1UL

July 2019

Dear Ms Voisin,

Thank you for your correspondence of 16 May to Matt Hancock and myself about the death of Ms Natasha Abrahart.

Firstly, I would like to say how sorry I was to read of the circumstances of Natasha's death. I can appreciate how distressing her loss, at such a young age, must be for her family and loved ones and would like to offer my sincerest condolences. We must do all we can to learn from deeply regrettable incidents such as these to prevent future deaths.

We recognise the importance of identifying and treating depression in suicide prevention and welcome the guidelines by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) on the treatment and management of depression in adults (Clinical Guideline 90¹), and the pathway guidance on anti-depressant treatment in adults.

I am aware that Clinical Guideline 90 is currently being updated. While it is not appropriate to pre-empt the results of consultation on the update of the guideline, NICE advises that the core message of the recommendation around follow up after the prescription of antidepressants is likely to remain.

¹ <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg90>

The latest version of the update that NICE is consulting on reads:

1.4.17 When prescribing antidepressant medication for people with depression who are under 30 years or are thought to be at increased risk of suicide:

- *see them 1 week after starting the antidepressant medication*
- *review them as often as needed, but no later than 4 weeks after the first appointment*
- *base the frequency of review on their circumstances (for example, the availability of support, break-up of a relationship, loss of employment), and any changes in suicidal ideation or assessed risk of suicide. [2018]²*

As you know, this guidance sets out preventative action for people at risk of suicide and we encourage the NHS to implement these guidelines. Clinical guidelines represent best practice and should be taken fully into account by clinicians.

You may wish to note that in October 2018, Health Education England (HEE) launched a suite of four Self Harm and Suicide Prevention Frameworks. The frameworks describe some of the important things that a skilled professional, or member of staff, needs to have to be able to support people who self-harm or have suicidal thoughts.

These frameworks highlight the importance of health professionals having the required knowledge of pharmaceutical interventions and, for those with prescribing rights, knowledge of the potential adverse effects of antidepressant medication, including possible increases in suicidal thoughts and behaviours. The frameworks also highlight the importance of knowledge of national guidance, including NICE guidelines, for the treatment of people who self-harm and/or are suicidal that include recommendations regarding the role of medication.

HEE is also undertaking a scoping exercise of existing suicide training provision to identify gaps, using the competency frameworks, to enable the development of an online compendium of training which will be freely accessible to all health professionals.

As the Minister for Universities, Chris Skidmore MP, and I advised when we jointly responded to you on a recent Prevention of Future Deaths Report issued following the inquest into the death of Mr Benjamin Murray, mental health and suicide prevention are key priorities for this Government.

² <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/indevelopment/gid-cgwave0725/documents>

This Government has set out an ambitious programme of work to reduce suicides, including actions being taken to improve the mental health of university students. This ambition is set out in the first cross-Government Suicide Prevention Workplan published in January 2019³.

Several initiatives are being undertaken to promote best practice in the higher education sector and to support universities to adopt mental health as a strategic priority. In summary, this includes:

- Guidance on measures to help prevent suicide, '*Suicide-Safer Universities*⁴', 2018. All universities are expected to actively engage with the guidance to improve mental health support and reduce suicide risks amongst their student population;
- Funding investment in 10 projects encouraging higher education providers to find new ways of combating student mental health issues, including the development of links between higher education providers and local primary care and mental health services⁵. Outcomes will be widely communicated across the sector;
- £1million extra funding announced by the Prime Minister in June 2019 for proposals to promote partnership working between the health and education sectors⁶;
- The University Mental Health Charter⁷, supported by the Government and led by the higher education sector to drive up standards in promoting student and staff mental health and wellbeing; and,
- Launch of the Education Transitions Network in March 2019⁸ by the Department for Education which will be developing a strategic approach to supporting students when starting university and will provide advice on how universities can get better at involving support networks at an early stage when students are struggling.

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/suicide-prevention-cross-government-plan>

⁴ <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Pages/guidance-for-universities-on-preventing-student-suicides.aspx>

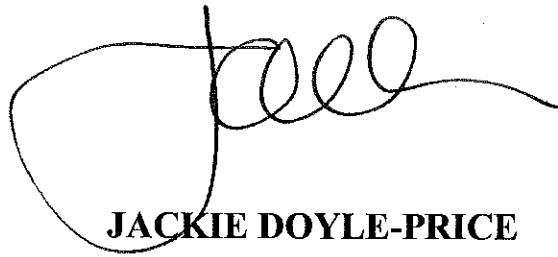
⁵ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/innovation-partnership-and-data-can-help-improve-student-mental-health-in-new-14m-drive/>

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-launches-new-mission-to-put-prevention-at-the-top-of-the-mental-health-agenda>

⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-package-of-measures-announced-on-student-mental-health>

⁸ <https://dfemedia.blog.gov.uk/2019/03/07/thursday-7-march-2019-university-mental-health/>

I hope this response demonstrates the Government's commitment to supporting student mental health and wellbeing and to the prevention of suicide.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jackie Doyle-Price', with a large loop on the left side and several smaller loops on the right side.

JACKIE DOYLE-PRICE