

PE2024/H: Create a national, public information programme to raise awareness of the impacts of steroids, selective androgen receptor modulators, and other performance enhancing drugs

Petitioner written submission, 10 April 2025

Summary of Key Points:

- An estimated 560 people will die each year from IPED use
- That number is likely to increase
- The Scottish Government's current policy will result in no further action
- The Scottish Government's commitment to support police to tackle criminality does not apply to IPEDs as they are legal to use.
- Likewise, the commitment to support local services would be limited to the three health boards that currently provide services for IPED users.

I write largely in response to the Scottish Government submission PE2024/G, to highlight that this submission will ultimately lead to no action. Although on the face of it the Minister was committing to continue a policy that might help reduce the impact of IPEDs, the unique legality of IPEDs and patchwork support provision for users means the Scottish Government are in fact indicating that they will do nothing. I also wish to draw the Committee's attention to the publication of an observational study, released since the Committee last met, that gives us a clear idea of the number of people who will die annually from harms resulting from IPED use.

That study from 2024 has highlighted the mortality risks of IPEDs. In an observational study over 11 years¹, nearly 1200 young men identified as users of anabolic steroids were compared to age matched controls in the general population. It found that 2.8% of IPED users died, compared to a 1% mortality rate in the general population. That hazard rating of 2.8, when applied to the previous estimate of 4% of the population using IPEDs made by the Drug and Mental Health Charity *We Are With You* ([provided by the Scottish Government in FOISA Request 202300382567](#)), would indicate an estimated death rate of 560 people per year. For comparison, in one 2019 study², heroin use had an excess death rate of 9.3% over a similar 11 year period. With an estimated 47,100 users in Scotland³, that would be approximately 400 deaths per year from the indirect harms of heroin use (and 389 direct deaths in 2023)⁴.

¹ [Windfeld-Mathiasen J, Heerfordt IM, Dalhoff KP, Andersen JT, Horwitz H. Mortality Among Users of Anabolic Steroids. JAMA. 2024;331\(14\):1229–1230.](#)

² [Lewer, D., Tweed, E., Aldridge, R. & Moreley K. \(2019\). Causes of hospital admission and mortality among 6683 people who use heroin: A cohort study comparing relative and absolute risks](#)

³ [Scottish Public Health Observatory. \(2024\). Drug Use: Availability and Prevalence.](#)

⁴ [Scottish Public Health Observatory. \(2024\). Drug Use: Health Harm.](#)

In the very first response to this petition, the Scottish Government stated “the focus of the Scottish Government’s National Mission on drugs is to reduce drug related deaths”. With the data suggesting that so many people die from IPED use (even if from long term or indirect causes), a position to refuse to take action is becoming increasingly untenable. Despite this, [the response from the Minister for Drugs and Alcohol Policy](#) ultimately means they will take no action.

The Minister stated that the Scottish Government’s policy is to continue to support the police in tackling any criminality. However, many IPEDs, such as selective androgen receptor modulators are entirely legal, and can be freely purchased online. Even where they are covered by the Misuse of Drugs Act, there is an exemption for anabolic steroids intended for personal use, meaning this commitment does not apply to this petition or this group of drugs. Either the Minister was aware of this and attempted to placate the Committee despite a policy of inaction, or she was genuinely unaware of the legal complexities and availability of IPEDs.

The Minister also committed to support local treatment and recovery services. However, as [I highlighted in submission PE2024/F](#), after a series of FOISA requests to every regional NHS Health Board in Scotland, there is a clear issue with a lack of service provision or support. If there were local services that could provide advice and treatment that were readily available, this petition would be largely redundant. As highlighted in my previous submission, from available data, only ~1% of IPED users are engaging with healthcare services; perhaps because these services are only available in three health boards. There is clearly a need for more widespread support than small initiatives in only three areas, but this is not addressed by the Scottish Government.

I note that when the Committee last discussed this petition, Maurice Golden MSP said they felt “we might be nearing the end of the road on this petition”. So I have no doubt that members of the Committee will be considering closing the petition when faced with the obstinate response from the Minister for Drugs and Alcohol Policy. However, in the 12 months it would take for another petition to be brought asking for this matter to be reconsidered, an estimated £72 million will have been spent by the NHS tackling this issue with minimal support from the Scottish Government and, more importantly, more than 550 people will have needlessly died without any further attempt at an intervention.

When I started this petition, I did so on the basis of a single person I knew who had almost lost their life. In the nearly two years since, there has been additional research published, and this research increasingly builds on the pre-existing evidence that action must be taken. This petition is no longer about one person who nearly died, but the hundreds who will die over the remainder of this Parliament’s term.

So if the members of the Committee feel, as Mr Golden suggested they might, that they cannot do anything further, I would ask that they instead consider referring the petition to the Health and Sport Committee. Although I appreciate that there are many demands on the time of Members of the Scottish Parliament, and many vital issues need to be considered, I hope that ten people dying every week would be reason enough to continue to call on the Scottish Government to take action.