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Why is killer party drug legal?

'Home Office dithering is to blame for the death of my darling daughter'

By Richard Edwards
Crime Correspondent

A PROMISING medical student has died after taking a "party drug" that the Home Office failed to ban despite announcing that it would be made illegal eight months ago, *The Daily Telegraph* can disclose.

Hester Stewart, 21, an "outstanding" student whose ambition was to become a surgeon, was found dead at a house in Brighton on Sunday morning, after a friend called police and said that she had taken a liquid drug called GBL.

Police are investigating whether she took the drug knowingly, but a long-term friend has told Miss Stewart's family that she "never ever took drugs" and would "never have knowingly taken this substance".

In an emotional interview with *The Daily Telegraph* yesterday, Maryon Stewart, her mother, a leading nutritionist, said that she felt "cheated, frustrated and angry" that the Home Office had hesitated on a promise last year to ban the substance, despite it being illegal in several other countries.

She said she was "mortified" to learn of the delays in prohibiting the drug, which is similar to the notorious "date-rape" drug GHB, and said that it may take "my darling Hester

to die for somebody to take notice".

The Government announced plans to ban GBL in August and said at the time that the drug "can lead to dependence, unconsciousness and even death by intoxication". But a delay in the ban becoming law has meant that it is still legal today and freely available on the internet for as little as 50p a dose.

The questions put pressure on the beleaguered Home Secretary, Jacqui Smith.

Miss Stewart is believed to be the third person to have died in the past 12 months after taking GBL - gamma-butyrolactone - which has been an increasingly popular drug on the party scene for the past five years.

GBL is converted in the stomach into GHB, which was banned in 2003. Doctors first gave warning about it in 2005, when one said that it was "vastly more dangerous than ecstasy". Dr Sean Cummings, who runs a private clinic in central London, said he knew of two deaths linked to it.

Last August, the Government's drugs advisers told the Home Office that the substance should be classified as a Class C drug.

But because it also has a use as an industrial solvent - in the plastics industry and as a nail polish remover - officials



Hester Stewart, 21, a promising medical student, died at the weekend after taking the drug GBL.

have been delayed in framing the legislation. It is banned for personal use in America, Canada and Sweden.

Mrs Stewart said: "How can the Home Office not be accountable for something like this? How come it's not classified? How could this happen? Some pen-pusher somewhere should be able to work out how to ban it. How come they hesitated?"

"This is a disaster. It's just

beyond belief that something like this could have happened to such a brilliant, caring, intelligent girl who had so much to offer the whole world, not just her family.

"I feel gutted, I feel cheated, I feel bitterly frustrated and angry that this has been allowed to happen."

Mrs Stewart is a founder of the Natural Health Advisory Service and presents a series on a satellite television chan-

nel. "In my work I teach people how to look after themselves and all the stuff I do is caring about people, and that's the kind of environment Hester's been brought up in," she said. "I'm just gutted the Home Office didn't care enough."

It is a tragic case with echoes of Leah Betts, the schoolgirl who died on her 18th birthday in 1995 when she took an ecstasy tablet. Her parents

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Swine flu: NHS orders 32m extra masks

By Rebecca Smith,
Nick Britten
and Lucy Cockcroft

MORE than 32 million masks are being ordered by the Department of Health as fears grow that swine flu could become a pandemic.

The disclosure came as: ■ Thousands of Britons were preparing to cut short their holidays in Mexico and thousands more had their travel plans thrown into chaos after major tour operators cancelled flights to the country.

■ Dozens of people in Britain were tested for the swine flu virus after two cases were confirmed.

■ Leaflets are to be sent to every house in Britain containing information about

than 7,000 holidaymakers stranded at home. Many of the 7,000 British tourists in Mexico are expected to take up the offer of an early return.

Tour operators said that flights leaving the country were operating as normal, there were currently spaces on them and no plans were in place to put on extra planes.

Thomas Cook, Virgin, Kuoni and TUI said that anyone booked on cancelled flights could re-book to another destination, delay their holidays or receive a full refund.

The first British holidaymakers to arrive home since the crisis began said Mexico City had become a "ghost town".

Karen Whitehouse, 22, and her boyfriend Alex Henney, 31, paid £1,300 each for a flight from Mexico City to Heathrow, landing yesterday afternoon, having cut short their two-week holiday after just five days.

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the swine flu outbreak and preventative measures.

■ New Zealand, Israel, Spain, Canada and the United States confirmed cases of H1N1.

The millions of masks being ordered by the Department of Health are mainly for health care professionals.

A spokesman said it already had a "substantial number" in stock.

Advice from the Health Protection Agency is that health care staff dealing with suspected swine flu cases should wear a disposable mask, gown and gloves and the patient should also be asked to wear a mask.

Experts have said that the masks do little to prevent the spread of swine flu among the general public.

Holiday plans were left in disarray yesterday when travel firms cancelled flights to Mexico.

Thomas Cook has cancelled six Thomas Cook and Airtours flights to the Mexican resort of Cancun for the next week.

TUI Travel, which owns Thomson and First Choice, cancelled 14 flights to Cancun and Cozumel up until May 8.

Virgin has cancelled package holidays to Mexico until May 5, as has the travel operator Kuoni until May 3.

British Airways said that it was continuing to fly as normal.

The cancellations left more

Mr Henney, a stockbroker from Clapham, said: "The people in Mexico were panicked."

"People were getting sick but ambulance crews were too terrified to take them to hospital."

Travellers were urged to check their insurance before changing holiday plans. Nick Starling, of the Association of British Insurers, said that while policies vary, some companies would only cover the cost of the holiday if the Government advised against travelling.

The Department of Health said that the leaflets would be sent out next week to the country's 25 million households.