

Party drug may have claimed 20 lives

By Richard Edwards
and Christopher Hope

UP TO 20 people may have died as a result of taking the party drug GBL, a Harley Street doctor said yesterday as the mother of a 21-year-old victim wrote to Jacqui Smith, the Home Secretary, demanding the substance be banned.

Politicians and medical experts joined the call for the substance to be made illegal after *The Daily Telegraph* yesterday disclosed the death of Hester Stewart, a medical student.

The Home Office has failed to ban GBL despite saying that it would be made illegal eight months ago after it was advised to do so by the Government's drugs advisers.

Dr Sean Cummings, who runs a private GP clinic in Harley Street, London, which specialises in drugs patients and has come across many cases of GBL poisoning, said about six people a year had died from the drug since it emerged in the past few years.

Available at just 50p a dose, it is similar to the banned "date-rape" drug GHB, and converts into that substance in the stomach. It can be lethal in tiny doses when mixed with alcohol.

"It is a very dangerous drug," Dr Cummings said.

"On the clubbing scene, I would say that GBL poisonings are a daily occurrence.

"There is also anecdotal evidence from a barman in one club in south London who said he had lost seven of his friends in one year."

Because GBL is also used as



Friends of Hester Stewart comfort each during two minutes' silence at Sussex University in Brighton. Miss Stewart, 21, inset, died after taking GBL at a party

an industrial solvent – in the plastics industry and as a nail polish remover – officials have been delayed in framing legislation, despite it being banned for personal use in the United States, Canada and Sweden.

Dr Cummings said: "It does not surprise me that it has not been banned. The Government has a consistent history of ignoring the advice of the drugs committee. Many of the

decisions are made in the best interests of politics rather than the health of the nation."

This summer, a Commons committee will examine the Home Office's approach to illegal drugs. Sources said the concerns about the legality of GBL would be raised.

In a statement released to *The Daily Telegraph*, Maryon Stewart, Hester's mother, welcomed the inquiry. "We intend

to campaign as a family to get this lethal substance banned in the UK," she said.

"If the Home Office had followed advice our daughter would still be alive and we would not now be living in hell. We are opening the campaign by writing to the Home Secretary requesting an immediate inquiry into why this substance was not banned last year as recommended."

Miss Stewart, 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 the liquid drug. Police are investigating whether she took the drug knowingly.

A post mortem examination has revealed Miss Stewart did not die of natural causes and the coroner is now awaiting

toxicology results. A Home Office spokesman said yesterday: "Evidence suggests misuse of GBL is low, but the Government accepts there are associated harms.

"We have not committed to ban GBL but work continues to look at how access to this chemical can be restricted to legitimate purposes. A consultation will shortly be launched with the chemical industry

'Shocking' Ban delay

Politicians demanded to know why GBL was not made illegal as soon as the recommendation from the drugs advisers was published last August.

Chris Grayling, shadow home secretary

There can be absolutely no excuse for the Government dragging its feet over this issue, given the fact they say the drug is dangerous and should be banned. There is no reason why the ban could not have happened straight away last summer.

Keith Vaz, chairman of the Commons home affairs select committee

I am shocked and disappointed that the Home Office hesitated on their decision to ban GBL. It is unacceptable that this drug is still legal.

Joan Ryan, Labour MP who introduced a Bill in the Commons last year to ban GBL

I called in October for it to be banned. It can be done in just 90 minutes. This has cross-party support. The Government needs to act now.

and the wider public before a decision is made."

● The Stewart family are setting up a fund in Hester's memory which will campaign for GBL to be banned and then work to raise awareness in parents, teachers, students and children of the dangers of social drugs. Please send donations to: Hester Stewart Memorial Foundation, PO Box 117, Rottingdean, BN51 9BG