

**The Northern Echo**  
The North's campaigning newspaper

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## COMMENT

### Tragedy can help others

THE tragic story of Angela Wrightson has cast a spotlight on a world that is alien to most of us.

Is it possible to draw anything positive from such a bleak case?

It has exposed an underworld where both Ms Wrightson and her killers ended up as victims of abuse and neglect.

Importantly, it has also brought to light the risks faced by vulnerable individuals in our communities, including people with mental health issues and some pensioners – that need to be addressed.

Ms Wrightson, who had suffered from mental health issues and substance misuse for most of her life, had complained that young people would come to her house and vandalise it. They kicked in her door and smashed her windows and taunted her so badly that she began to pay people from her benefits to leave her alone.

Sometimes her vulnerability was mistaken for criminality. Once she accidentally started a small fire in her kitchen and ended up being arrested on suspicion of arson, despite the fire service raising an internal safeguarding alert.

The two teenage girls who tortured and killed her are now serving life sentences, with a minimum of 15 years behind bars.

The review into the case, which we have covered in detail in today's *Echo* as we believe exposes some very important issues, highlighted failings by community safety agencies, but found that no one could have foreseen the attack. There are important lessons to be learned however. One of these is that greater efforts must be taken to protect the most vulnerable members of our communities from abuse and exploitation. If that happens then Ms Wrightson's needless, tragic death could leave a positive legacy for others.

 **What do you think?**  
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# A warning not to be sneezed at



**NOSE FOR DANGER:** People suffering from hayfever are urged to avoid allergens, and are often recommended for drug treatment

**W**ITH the summer months upon us, sadly some will be dreading the so called hay fever season, where rising pollen counts can make what many consider the most pleasant days, seem unbearable. It isn't a small issue either, with approximately 13 million UK residents suffering some degree of symptoms during this time. And although for some, the degree of irritation may be mild, for others it can be severely debilitating.

So it won't come as a surprise to learn that many resort to seemingly harmless antihistamines, either over the counter, or on prescription, in order to combat the symptoms and get on with their lives.

However, the presumption that antihistamines are without side-effect is sadly incorrect, and is one of the reasons why the number of convictions for "drug-driving" has rocketed, since the introduction of simple police road side tests in 2015. These use a swab placed in the cheek, which is able to detect levels of drugs both recreational, as well as prescribed that may be impairing a driver's ability to proceed safely.

We have long known that alcohol affects reaction times, and indeed recreational drugs by their ability to alter perception have the same capacity to adversely affect functioning. So it would seem entirely fair that drivers caught under the influence of these substances be apprehended, for their own safety as well as that of other road users. Yet it is increasingly recognised that certain prescription drugs, namely strong painkillers, as well as some medications used to manage anxiety can produce similar symptoms. And now it appears antihistamines may also be to blame, with confirmed side-effects including drowsiness, blurred vision and indeed slower reaction times.

So, although the medications themselves are legal, if you are stopped by the police and convicted of dangerous driving, even if your actions are felt to be due to antihistamines, you may still incur significant punishment including fines, a driving ban, and



With a soaring rise in the number of drug driving convictions GP **Dr Zak Uddin**, examines the side effects of a medication many initially presume to be completely harmless

at worst a prison sentence, depending on the circumstances.

The symptoms of hay fever are due to pollen, which is released by flowers into the atmosphere during their reproductive cycle, hence why sufferers are more affected during the summer months. Proteins in the pollen irritate the eyes, and the lining of the nose, which directly communicates with the sinuses, hence the symptoms of itchy eyes, runny nose and facial pain. As with all conditions, symptoms range from mild to severe, and persons who also have other allergic conditions including asthma and eczema tend to be more affected. It is more common in boys than girls, this discrepancy disappearing in adulthood, with some individuals growing out of it.

**T**HE management of hay fever, medically referred to as seasonal allergic rhinitis is twofold, and involves allergen avoidance as well as drug treatments some of which can be purchased over the counter, with others being prescription only.

Allergen avoidance simply means staying indoors during those days where the pollen count is highest, as advised by the Met Office. In addition, if you are in a car, make sure that the windows are kept up during the journey and even after, as pollen that enters a car may remain in the vehicle.

Before considering anti-histamines, nasal

sprays as well as eye drops are available, which may relieve the complaints of runny nose and itchy eyes.

Practical suggestions include wraparound sunglasses as these reduce the exposure of the eyes to pollen and also placing a small amount of Vaseline under your nostrils as this may trap pollen before it enters the nasal cavities and cause irritation.

If you have to resort to antihistamines it is worth first considering if your symptoms are such that they in themselves may distract you from driving. Sensible advice is to select a non-sedating antihistamine, yet still try it at a point when you know you will not be expected to drive. Despite being non-sedating, individuals will react differently to the same preparation, so it's important to see how it affects you personally. Equally importantly, alcohol, even in small amounts may magnify the effects of any antihistamine, so please don't get caught out by this simple mistake.

In conclusion, there are many practical manoeuvres that can be employed to reduce the unpleasant side effects of high pollen levels. If you are unsure as to which medications are appropriate for you, a discussion with your pharmacist or routine GP will usually help. Your own safety and that of others should always be paramount, and if you do feel unable to drive safely, please always remember there are alternatives.

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