

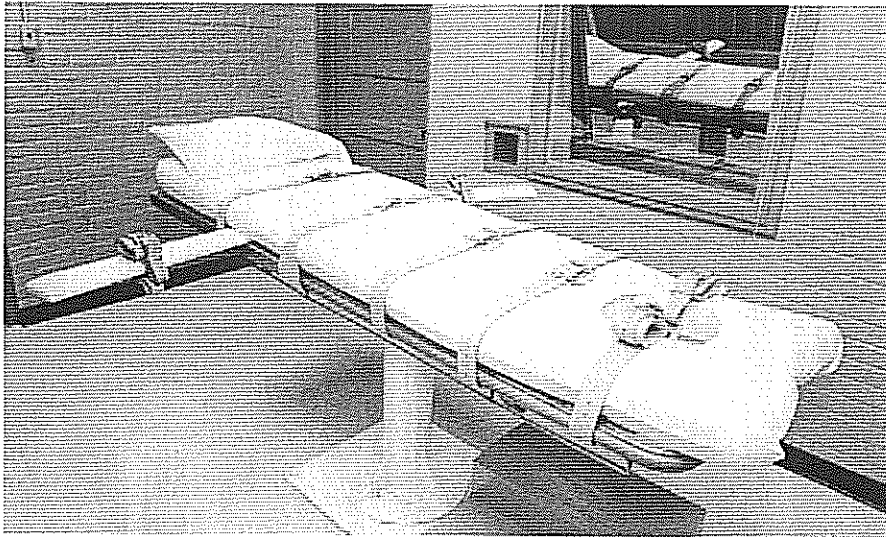
UK sells US enough drugs to execute 100 death row inmates, inquiry told

Mother of prisoner who may have died in agony because UK-sourced drug did not work gives evidence at Westminster

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The death chamber at Huntsville, Texas. Photograph: Paul Buck/EPA

Enough pharmaceutical drugs have been sold to the US by licensed British wholesalers since last summer to execute 100 death row inmates, a parliamentary inquiry has heard.

A shortage of supplies in the US is forcing American states to search abroad for painkillers, paralyzing agents and heart-stopping compounds administered in lethal injections.

Evidence suggesting that one London-sourced anaesthetic did not work effectively - resulting in a prisoner apparently dying in agony - should result in the UK licensing authority recalling the drug immediately, the charity Reprieve urged.

The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) last November imposed export controls on sodium thiopental, a now rarely-used anaesthetic, after it emerged that a small-scale wholesaler working out of the back office of a west London driving school sold the drug to Georgia's and Arizona's department of corrections.

California and Tennessee also purchased large quantities of the drug from unidentified UK suppliers last autumn. "A lot of drugs have been sold out there," Clive Stafford Smith, director of

the anti-capital punishment charity Reprieve, told the all-party parliamentary group on the abolition of the death penalty. "More than 100 people will die thanks to British drugs."

Tom Smith, the civil servant responsible for drawing up export control lists, told the inquiry that his department is considering whether to impose exports controls on three further drugs to prevent them being used for lethal injection executions: pancuronium bromide, potassium chloride and pentobarbital.

"As far as we are aware," he told the session at Westminster, "we are the only government in the world to impose export controls on medicines."

The Foreign Office has written to the federal government in Washington and certain US states setting out its opposition to the death penalty and expressing its concern that British-supplied drugs are being used.

One such letter sent to a court hearing failed to prevent an execution going ahead. Three US death row inmates have so far been killed using UK-supplied sodium thiopental supplies.

The anaesthetic was supplied by Dream Pharma of Acton, west London. At the time of the sale it was legal. Its owner, Mehdi Alavi, has declined to comment on the transaction.

The mother of one of the three men executed with UK-sourced drugs gave evidence to the all-party parliamentary group. Patches Rhode, 48, said: "When he was executed [in Georgia last September] I didn't know that British drugs had been used.

"At first I didn't believe it. I know your country is opposed to the death penalty. I don't understand why or how it could have happened. My son, Brandon, tried to commit suicide because he said he couldn't just sit there [and die]."

Eyewitnesses reported that Brandon Rhode did not close his eyes after the sodium thiopental was administered, suggesting that it may not have been effective in rendering him unconscious or numbing the pain. The drug could also have been damaged by the way in which it was stored, transported or made up in the prison.

Asked whether it would issue a recall notification for the sodium thiopental, the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency, which licenses wholesalers in the UK, said: "In the absence of evidence of quality defects affecting the batches of the three licensed medicinal products exported to the US by Dream Pharma, there are no grounds to require their recall. Any decision concerning the removal of stock of the batches of the three medicinal products from the possession of the end-users in the US would be a matter for the US authorities."