

The “miracle” medication that was supposed to relieve two of these women’s illnesses instead sent them on a nightmare journey of gambling addiction, ruining their lives. Now they are fighting back, writes **Sue Smethurst**.

“I WAS LIVING A DOUBLE LIFE”

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRONWYN KIDD. STYLING BY VIRGINIA DOWZER. HAIR AND MAKE-UP BY BERNADETTE FISERS.
SOFA FROM MARTIN ALLEN ANTIQUES. PAT WEARS FRENCH CONNECTION TOP, SUSSAN CARDIGAN AND LEGGINGS,
MIMCO NECKLACE AND ZOMB SHOES. THESE IMAGES HAVE BEEN RETOUCHEE.

Connie Gafa (left), with her daughter Rose, and Pat Galea (standing) are part of the class action against drug companies for the terrible side effects they suffered.

PAT GALEA was so relieved when her doctor diagnosed her restless leg syndrome. After years of suffering sleepless nights, chronic exhaustion and stomach-churning anxiety attacks, she had finally found a medication that allowed her to rest. "It was wonderful," Pat says. "It was such a godsend to have a full night's sleep."

Connie Gafa felt the same way. When the symptoms of Parkinson's disease began to stiffen the vibrant grandmother's petite body, she was prescribed the medication. "I loved it, I felt like I was normal again. I wish I could still have it," she says.

Yet Connie can't because, for both her and Pat, the medication that changed their lives has also destroyed them. Along with 120 other victims, Pat and Connie have joined one of Australia's largest ever medical class actions against drug companies Pfizer Australia and Aspen Pharmacare Australia.

The plaintiffs claim they were not adequately warned that the medication they were prescribed to switch off the physical symptoms of their illness, known as "dopamine agonists", could also switch on the pleasure-seeking part of the brain which prompts behaviours such as pathological gambling, sex addiction and compulsive shopping.

For both Pat and Connie, the tiny tablets they relied on every day to relieve the crippling symptoms of their illnesses triggered gambling addictions which ultimately sent Pat to jail and almost cost Connie her life.

"I wanted to kill myself," Connie says. "There were days I thought the only way I can stop this is to hang myself. I was so ashamed of what I was doing and I had no control over it."

"We weren't warned about the side effects," adds Pat, who spent a month in jail after being caught shoplifting to feed her pokie addiction.

"If I'd known what this medication could do, I never would have started taking it."

Pat Galea, 61

MODERN MEDICINE has worked miracles, but every now and then a drug has extreme side effects. A few years ago, users of the sleeping pill Stilnox reported bizarre behaviour while they slept – crashing cars, having sex, fighting. In other cases, quit-smoking drugs have been blamed for depression. Often, side effects are not recognised until the drug is widely available.

Pat Galea was a happily married mother of three with a successful career in finance before she began taking what she thought was the perfectly safe drug, Cabaser. "I was very happy, I had a

great family, a good job," she tells The Weekly. "I was your average mum next door, you know – forever being a taxi for the kids. I'd never been in any trouble and I certainly wasn't a gambler. I had no interest in the pokies whatsoever."

For years, Pat suffered from restless leg syndrome and was constantly exhausted. Any time she tried to sit down or lie in bed, her legs would twitch and she would feel crippling anxiety. "I'd sleep for two hours, then I'd wake up and I'd have to stretch and get up, and this went on all night every night," she says.

"I had three kids, I was working and I was constantly tired. It got worse and worse. One night, I saw a story on TV ➤

"I'd never been in any trouble and I certainly wasn't a gambler. I had no interest in the pokies."



Pat Galea was a married mother of three with a successful career when a drug she was taking turned her life upside down.

PAT WEARS FRENCH CONNECTION CARDIGAN AND TOP, SUSSAN LEGGINGS, MIMCO NECKLACE AND ZOMP SHOES.

about restless leg syndrome and I said to my husband, 'That's what I've got'."

Pat's doctor prescribed dopamine agonists to stimulate the production of dopamine, a neurological transmitter which sends relaxation messages around the body, particularly targeting pleasure sensors. It was a wonder drug which eased the impulses of her legs. "After I started taking the medication, it was like, 'Wow!'. It was an amazing relief."

The initial doses were small, but Pat's symptoms worsened, so her medication was increased. Along with it came an insatiable urge to gamble. "I started popping into the pokies after work, or on the weekend," she says. "It wasn't over the top then, but as my medication increased, it got worse. I gambled every day – sometimes I'd sneak out at night when everyone was asleep and go to the pokies."

"I began to think about it all the time. On the nights my wages went into the bank, I'd wait for my salary to present in my account. Then I'd spend the night gambling. My pay would be gone before daybreak. I was living a double life. I lied a lot. I lied to my husband, my kids. There were times I stole my husband's credit card and lost his money. I lost \$2000 one night, then went home and hopped back into bed."

Pat's marriage fell apart. She lost her job, her car, frittered away every dollar of the divorce settlement and was stealing money from her children. At her lowest, she began shoplifting, returning the goods to the store after she'd stolen them so she could collect a cash refund, which she would use to play the pokies. She was eventually caught and spent a month in jail.

"I got caught stealing a packet of batteries," she recalls. "I had the money to pay for them, but it's like a game to see if you can get away with things. It was hell and I couldn't understand why I was behaving this way. I screamed and cried for hours when they took me to jail. I kept yelling out, 'You don't understand, I don't belong here'. They

put me on suicide watch. But this was not me, this person was not who I was – I was living a double life."

Pat searched online for more information about the medication she was taking and asked her doctor if it could cause gambling addiction. He told her that others suffered similar effects, but it was a part of her condition, not a result of the medication. She took his word. "Why wouldn't I? He's the doctor," she says. "Who would think that a medication could make you a gambling addict?"

"I screamed and cried for hours when they took me to jail. I kept yelling out, 'I don't belong here!'"

For 10 years, Pat battled to overcome the grips of the addiction. "The medication gives you a false sense of bravado – you think you can get away with anything," she says. "Every time I

took a pill, I was re-fuelling the desire."

Three years ago, Pat's GP saw a story on the ABC's *7.30 Report* which revealed the US Food and Drug Administration had found a strong association between dopamine agonists and obsessive pleasure-seeking behaviour, such as sex and gambling addiction. He called Pat straight away. "I was seething," she says, "I was so angry. I'd been on these medications for 10 years and I kept saying to the doctor and even my kids that I was sure it was the tablets, but no one believed me. My kids would say, 'Yeah, but Mum, medication won't make you do that'."

When Pat stopped taking the medication, the desire to gamble immediately ceased and she has not been near pokies since. "It was like a fog lifting – the old me was returning," she says. "But then I really had to come to terms with what I'd done. It destroyed my life, my marriage, my children's lives. It was hell, absolute hell. The hardest thing to deal with is losing my family's trust and the respect of my work colleagues. I'll never get over it."

"But I am so angry with the pharmaceutical company that we weren't warned. They are dealing with people's lives and it's a ripple effect – it affected my family and friends, my colleagues."

Connie Gafa, 63

CONNIE GAFA knows how Pat feels. Losing her family's life savings is heartbreaking, but Connie can never forgive herself for losing their trust and respect. Her daughter, Rose, says that before she began taking the medication, her mother was "dynamite, full of energy, the rock that held the family together".

The busy grandmother began taking Cabaser when she was struck down by Parkinson's disease, to ease the tremors crippling her. "Mum never sat still," says Rose. "She helped us with our children, she was busy with Dad, we went everywhere and did everything together as a family. Mum was the centre."

Soon after she began taking the medication, Connie's behaviour changed dramatically. "She was acting very strangely," Rose explains. "She'd ring me at work and ask to borrow money, which was not like Mum at all. She'd always looked after all of the family finances, she saved every dollar and she was a very proud, independent woman."

"Over time, it became more and more frequent. Almost every day, she'd ring and ask me for money and I knew something was going on."

Within months of beginning the medication, Connie, a pensioner, had secretly taken out a bank loan, then a credit card, to feed her addiction. In all, Connie was given three bank loans, which she could not pay off, and pawned all of her jewellery – precious family heirlooms.

"I was living a double life," she says. "I'd get up in the morning and just take off to the pokies. Every chance I had, I'd sneak out – at night, when my husband was asleep, during the day, whenever I had a dollar in my hand, I was off."

Rose confronted her terrified mother, who confessed she had a gambling addiction. She then arranged for Connie to see a counsellor and set about the humiliating process of having the 63-year-old grandmother placed on the banned list at the casino and pokies venues in their area. "We took her picture around to every venue and asked them to ban her. It was horrible," Rose says.

Her daughter's intervention didn't stop Connie gambling. "I was so desperate, >



Connie Gafa is thankful her daughter Rose (right) and her family stuck by her.

I once asked my doctor to lend me money and he gave \$40," she says. "How terrible. In one pokies session, I lost \$5000 and I wanted to hang myself. But I didn't stop. In my head, I thought I had to go back in and win it all back. I was absolutely crazy."

Rose gave up work and began to monitor her mother every day, yet even when they did the supermarket shopping, Connie would run off to the local pokies. "My mind was never at peace," she says. "It was like having the devil inside me; a physical urge would come over me and I had to gamble. It was like a rush."

Connie's counsellor had also seen the 7.30 Report story about the links between the drugs and gambling. She called Connie and Rose, and the next day they went to Connie's GP. He took Connie off the drugs immediately, but the damage was done.

She confessed to her husband of 32 years and they sold their home to pay back her debts. She owed Rose \$60,000 for the

bank loans and credit cards that she had paid off on her mother's behalf. "I'm very angry with the banks, too," says Rose. "Here was a pensioner, clearly ill, unable to even write her own name because of Parkinson's disease and the banks kept giving her money to gamble, and she had absolutely no means of paying it off."

Connie estimates she lost more than \$140,000, along with priceless jewellery given to her when her family came to Australia from Malta.

Ironically, she misses the relief the drugs gave her from the cruel effects of Parkinson's disease, which has now ravaged her body. She will undergo brain surgery later this year in the hope of easing the constant tremors.

Pat estimates she gambled away more than \$500,000. Both she and Connie

"My mind was never at peace. It was like having the devil inside me."

now hope the class action may lead to some compensation for their losses. Anne Shortall, from lawyers Arnold, Thomas & Becker, says Connie and Pat are not alone.

"We have men and women who have suffered the most terrible losses. Many were professional people who'd had good careers, responsible jobs, who suddenly took on inexplicable behaviour," she says. "Many were of retirement age when they were struck with Parkinson's and have lost their homes, investment properties, superannuation and, in some cases, their husbands, wives and families. Many are still too ashamed to speak about it – in some cases, their families still don't know."

There are similar class actions against the drug companies underway in the US, UK and Canada, and the drugs have been banned from sale in some European countries. Recently, a former patient in the US sued and was awarded US\$8 million in compensation.

Warnings have now been included on some of the medications, but Anne says it's too late for many. "There is evidence that these companies knew about these drastic side effects many years before consumers were warned," the lawyer says, "and we believe Australian companies lagged behind their overseas subsidiaries in issuing the appropriate warnings to consumers."

Connie and Pat agree, saying they want the drug companies to recognise that their uncontrollable gambling wasn't their fault. "I wasn't like this before I started taking the drugs," says Connie, wiping away tears. "Nobody told me I would gamble. It has ruined our lives and I am so ashamed of myself and what I have done to

my husband and to Rose and my son. I am just so grateful they have stood by me."

"I'd hate this to happen to anyone else," says Pat. "If our stories can stop one other person suffering what we did, then it's worthwhile." ■

If you believe you have been a victim of these medications, you can join the class action by contacting lawyers Arnold, Thomas & Becker, 1800 737 788.

CONNIE WEARS T.L. WOOD CARDIGAN, SUSSAN TOP, MIMCO PEARLS AND ZOMP SHOES, ROSE WEARS T.L. WOOD SHIRT AND PANTS, MIMCO NECKLACE AND ZOMP BOOTS.