

# Development of Thalidomide in German Laboratory Traced

**Editor's note:** Following is the first of three dispatches on thalidomide—its development, its delayed-action effects, and of the steps being taken to safeguard against hidden effects of drugs.

**By PAUL R. ALLERUP**  
 London—(AP)—In the spotless, busy laboratories of Chemie Grunenthal in the Rhineland city of Stolberg one day in 1953, there was a rustle of excitement.

There was every indication the German scientists had found something—a tranquilizing drug virtually free of any of the acute toxic effects so common to barbiturates.

If the indication was borne out by tests, here would be a remarkable new sedative. It could be taken with no after-effects of grogginess, or nausea. It could be a sure sleep-inducer.

It was called thalidomide, a contraction of phthalimidoglutarimide, its scientific name.

Chemie Grunenthal, or Grunenthal Chemicals, one of the largest chemical firms in Germany, tested the drug for 3½ years on rats, mice, guinea pigs, rabbits and cats.

**Passed Every Trial**  
 In Grunenthal's own laboratories, the new drug passed every trial with an "A" mark. The checking and further study were turned over to an independent research clinic.

Grunenthal was satisfied but required confirmation. The clinic's verdict: "The preparation is compatible, it is excellent." As required by German law, the government-licensed clinic issued a certificate approving the drug for public sale.

Grunenthal named it "Contergan," the Federal Health Bureau registered the product—and in 1957 it was placed on the general market to be sold without prescription.

Contergan found quick acceptance from the public. Doctors recommended it as a sleeping pill, or general sedative. Users awoke refreshed, with no morning-after headache or bad taste in the mouth. Doctors found that highly disturbed patients were calmed by the drug.

And another important success for Contergan was discovered. It proved a boon to women in the early stages of pregnancy by easing the dread "morning sickness."

Sales boomed. Meantime word of the new "wonder tranquilizer" had reached British chemists. In Britain the big distillers became interested, and as early as April, 1956, before thalidomide went on the German market, the company began its own tests.

**Findings Confirmed**  
 The British tests confirmed what the German clinicians had found. In April, 1958, with the approval of the Committee for the Classification of Proprietary Drugs, thalidomide was put on sale in Britain under the trade name "Distaval."

In the next three years the tranquilizer spread through much of the world, to Brazil in South America, to Canada, through most of Europe. It was given many other names in the different markets, among them Softenon, Sedi-Lab, Lulamim, Neurodyn, Neurosedyn, Algosediv, Grippez, Valgraine, Kevadon, Asmaval, Expectorans. Some were imitations of the original but all contained thalidomide in varying proportions. Many chemical firms were now involved in manufacture and sale of the popular sedative.

Second thoughts about thalidomide were slow in coming. When two infant were born in Germany late in 1960 with no arms and hands growing out of the shoulders, no one connected the cases with any drug. Such births are rare, but not unknown to the medical profession. In the case of the German babies it was found they were victims of Phocomelia—or "Seal-Melia" in description of the flipper-like appearance the malformation sometimes takes. The name comes from the Greek.

## Private Winemakers To Notify Officials

Persons intending to produce wine for family use were reminded today by federal authorities that they must notify the government at least five days before beginning production. If they do not, the wine is subject to tax and seizure and the maker is liable to criminal action.

Up to 200 gallons of wine may be produced annually for family use without payment of tax, if the wine-maker is the head of a family.

Forms for giving notice of home wine production may be obtained in this area from the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax division, 225 U.S. Courthouse, Portland, Oregon.

But suddenly there were more births of phocomelic children—too many to be coincidence. In Hamburg, Germany, Dr. Widukind Lenz learned of 20 malformed births. He questioned the mothers and learned most of them had taken Contergan in their early pregnancies. In November, 1961, Lenz spoke on the matter at a medical meeting in Duesseldorf, suggesting a drug—which he did not then name—was linked to the strange births.

Lenz was convinced he knew the cause. On Nov. 16, 1961, he telephoned the Grunenthal firm and urged its directors to remove Contergan from the market. Lenz predicted that Germany could expect between 50 and 100 malformed babies to be born each month. Grunenthal was not willing to take any chances either and on Nov. 19 Contergan was taken off the German market. By then some 100 million of the pills had been sold. In some places thalidomide also

had been sold in liquid and suppository form. **Worst Fear Confirmed**  
 The West German Health Ministry has formally confirmed the worst of Dr. Lenz's fears and estimates there have been at least 4,000 malformed births in the country since 1957. Distaval and four other preparations containing the drug also were withdrawn immediately by the British. The London Clinic Medical Journal reported that doctors believe at least 800 malformed

infants had been born in Britain although only 50 had been officially reported. The warnings did not bring immediate withdrawal of the drug everywhere. In Italy there was no public awareness of the German and British actions until June of this year when doctors reported at a Turin meeting that three recent malformed births could be traced to thalidomide. That was on June 16. On June 20 the Italian government suspended production and sale of seven tranquilizers contain-

ing thalidomide. A week later Italy banned the drug. One by one, Holland, Denmark, Switzerland, Sweden, Belgium, Portugal and Austria ordered the drug off the market. France and Spain, among European countries, never approved use of thalidomide although in France it was reported to have been sold illegally. One case has been widely publicized in Belgium as that of Mrs. Sharri Finkbine in the United States and with

even greater tragic consequences. **Child Found Dead**  
 The Belgian case involved a "Seal-Melia" baby born to a woman in Liege. When the mother left the hospital for home police were forewarned that her despair was such they suspected she would kill the child. When police investigated the child was dead. The mother, 25-year-old Suzanne Coipel, was arrested, along with her husband, her mother, her sister and her doctor. The parents are accused

of having administered the infant a fatal dose of barbiturates, and the doctor with conniving in the act. Somehow, the story of thalidomide made no great impact in this country until mid-July when the Washington Post disclosed the story of a woman doctor in the Federal Drug administration and her determined fight to keep the drug off the American market. While the drug had not been certified for general use in this country, it was being

tested on an experimental basis. And suddenly, many women and some doctors remembered that they had obtained a new and effective sedative drug abroad or had received samples from a U. S. manufacturer. The labels may have said "Contergan" or "Distaval" or "Kevadon." However spelled, it was a still thalidomide. Stories of deformities—fortunately few—cropped up in this country, too, and a nationwide search began for all outstanding supplies.

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