

World Warning System On Bad Drugs Is Urged

By Morton Mintz
Staff Reporter

Dr. Helen B. Taussig, the pioneer American investigator of birth deformities attributed to thalidomide, called yesterday for an international warning system on new drugs.

The Baltimore pediatrician said that had such a warning system been in effect 10 months ago, the birth of several hundred armless, legless and otherwise malformed children might have been prevented.

In November, a suspected link was established between thalidomide and the birth of about 5000 deformed babies in West Germany. The sedative was immediately withdrawn from the market there.

But largely because of inefficient international communications among health officials the drug continued to be marketed in at least five countries, including Canada and Italy, at least until March. In Japan it remained on sale into May.

7500 Deformed Babies

The world total of deformed babies is expected to reach 7500, including those yet to be born in the five nations.

Although Dr. Frances O. Kelsey of the Food and Drug Administration blocked marketing of the drug in the United States, Dr. Taussig said that she expects deformed children also will be born in this country, principally to mothers who took thalidomide obtained in other nations.

The sedative was available in at least 28 countries under about 30 different trade names. Generally, thalidomide pills, including the 2.5 million distributed for "investigational use" in the United States, were unlabeled.

Dr. Taussig, who investigated the West German outbreak in January and then lectured and wrote about it here, was interviewed by telephone at the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine.

She had just returned from Lisbon, Portugal, where she attended the 10th International Congress of Pediatrics last week.

She was one of the signers of a petition circulated among pediatricians from 67 countries urging the International Congress to ask the World Health Organization to prevent distribution of insufficiently tested drugs.

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starter, WHO could act as a clearing house to receive and circulate information about drug withdrawals, about the adequacy of testing and about warnings on new drugs as they may come up in any of thousands of medical journals.

Reacted Too Slowly

The pediatric congress was told by Dr. Lidukind Lenz, of Hamburg, who established the suspected thalidomide-deformity link in West Germany, that "the warning has mostly been left to the lay press and to the producers . . . the health authorities of most countries reacted surprisingly slowly."

Even before the West German action, a Sydney, Australia, gynecologist, Dr. W. G. McBride, had reported evidence of the link in the *Lancet*, a British medical publication, and the *Australian Medical Journal*. Australia withdrew thalidomide from the market ahead of West Germany—but few outside of Australia were aware of this.

Dr. Taussig, who with another Johns Hopkins physician devised the famed, life-saving "blue-baby" operation in 1944, said in the interview that she hopes to see the House accept intact the drug-safety bill passed 78 to 0 by the Senate. She said she feared that if this were not done, we "may end up with no bill."

Once the legislation is enacted, she said, her "next campaign" will be to build up public demand for prescriptions to be labeled as to contents.

She said the necessity for this was demonstrated by the horrifying case of a British woman who had taken sleeping pills not knowing they were thalidomide. She gave birth to a deformed baby. She continued taking the pills, still not knowing what they were—and gave birth to a second deformed child.

In Washington, physicians generally do not direct druggists to "label as to contents," although there is a trend in this direction.