

# Ireland's Thalidomide survivors

It came in syrup or tablet form and had horrendous consequences. Thousands of Irish women took the Thalidomide drug for morning sickness while they were pregnant between 1959 and 1962 – a drug that was marketed as being “as safe as a sweet”. Margaret Hawkins reports.



**T**hirty-two Irish people affected by the morning sickness drug Thalidomide as unborn babies survive today, many missing arms or legs or with stunted growth, deafness or shortened limbs.

Peggy Murphy's son Martin (48) was born with no left ear because of Thalidomide. “Martin was my third pregnancy but my fourth child,” Peggy says. “He was born in September 1961.”

During her pregnancy with Michael, Peggy, from Templemichael in Cork, felt nauseous all day, rather than just in the morning, and was finding it difficult to cope, running a home and minding three small children.

She was almost six months pregnant when she asked her gynaecologist for something to ease the sickness. “He said he could prescribe a tablet that was very effective. He prescribed 24 tablets for me, but I only took 12 at the time, because they were one shilling each – a lot of money back then,” she says.

“I took the 12, and that's what they did to Martin. If I'd taken 24, he would probably have died.”

While Martin's delivery was normal, he needed oxygen immediately after birth, so Peggy didn't see her newborn son until evening time. “The gynaecologist and the nurse never told me there was anything wrong with him. It was my husband who noticed it first, and when I saw Martin I was devastated,” she says.

“I couldn't understand how it could have happened. I'd heard of babies with Down syndrome and things like that, but I had never seen anything like this.”

What happened, Peggy says, changed her life completely. “There was an awful lot running through my head in the first few weeks, like: ‘How could this happen?’ and ‘Why me?’ When I took him out, people stared at him, too. There were lots of things that were very upsetting, like people saying it was God's will – that was the trend at the time. It was very hurtful. It wasn't God's will, it was because of a tablet that should never have been licensed.”

## DRUG CONNECTION

Peggy had her first inkling that there was a drug connection when she took Martin to see a paediatrician at the age of six weeks.



“This doctor had just returned from working in England. He asked me if I'd taken tablets when I was pregnant, and I said yes. He said he had seen babies the very same as Martin in England, and there was talk of a drug being withdrawn that was doing harm.”

It is a day Peggy will never forget. “I couldn't believe it. Part of me was relieved to know there was a cause for Martin's disability, but I was so angry that tablets like that had been licensed in this country.”

“I'm still angry today, every time I look at him. I am thankful he has his limbs, though. So many of the Thalidomide children have no arms or legs.”

## SCANDAL OF SILENCE

Peggy says that the silence and the secrecy around the whole scandal was unbelievable. “No one wanted to know – the doctors, hospitals, government – nobody. I think they were all afraid of being sued.

“I couldn't do anything at the time, because we got no help. It was different at that time, too. You kept quiet about things, and there were no phones and Internet to look things up.”

Eventually, politicians Dr John O'Connell and Brendan Corish invited top German doctors over to Ireland to assess the children affected, she says.

“I got a telegram on a Sunday saying to go to the Hospital for Sick Children in Crumlin the following Monday for three o'clock. The whole room was full of children with something wrong with them. It was shocking to see.

“The doctor who looked at Martin didn't even examine him. The minute he saw him, he said he was typical of babies born to mothers who took Thalidomide in later pregnancy,” she recalls.

Peggy also feels very angry about the seven-month delay here before the government withdrew the drug. “They knew the company had with-

drawn it. It's a scandal that it wasn't stopped here there and then, but it wasn't.”

## VERY INDEPENDENT AND CAPABLE

Martin attended a school for the deaf until he was 17 years old and, while sign language hasn't been totally successful, he learned to read and write. “He can read the paper, which is great,” his mother says, “and he is very independent. He can drive and do his own business to an extent, but not being able to speak or hear are huge losses.”

Peggy finds the fact that the Irish government has never apologised hard to take. “No one has ever said sorry for what happened. The compensation was an insult too.

“Today, very little can happen to a child and they get millions in compensation. Martin got his compensation – the maximum amount because he couldn't communicate – when he was 18.

“He was able to build himself

## BE INFORMED

The British government recently apologised to its 466 Thalidomide survivors and announced a £20 million compensation deal. Northern Ireland's Health Minister also announced a £1.1 million compensation package for the 18 Thalidomide survivors there.

When asked for a comment, the Department of Health said: “The Thalidomide product sold in Ireland was

## OFFICIALLY SPEAKING

manufactured by Chemie Grunenthal – a German company. Irish survivors of Thalidomide received compensation from the German Foundation. (This ranged between £1,260-£4,180, depending on disability, according to the ITA).

“The Irish government's decision of January 1975 augmented the compensation provided by the German Foun-

dation, which included a lump sum of four times the German lump sum. (This ranged between £5,040 and £16,720, according to the ITA).

“A monthly allowance for life was also agreed, equivalent of the German allowance, to each survivor of Thalidomide. The monthly allowance is paid by the Department of Health and Children and is currently between €514.59 and

€1,109.46 per month. The monthly allowance is tax-free and is not reckonable for State benefits. Each individual is automatically entitled to a medical card.

“The Minister and Department officials have met with the Irish Thalidomide Association (ITA) on a number of occasions. The association requested a review of the payments by the Irish government. In May 2009, the Minister

asked the State Claims Agency to assess the requests. A report is expected in mid-March.

“The State Claims Agency expects to meet with the groups representing victims of Thalidomide, following which the agency will report to the Minister. Any proposal which comes out of this process will need to be considered by Government.”