

The Sydney Morning Herald

National [Healthcare](#)

This was published 10 years ago

Australian thalidomide managers knew drug was killing babies 'for five months'

Nick McKenzie and Richard Baker

May 24, 2015 – 10.22pm

Australian managers of the firm that sold thalidomide to pregnant women in the 1950s and '60s actively covered up concerns it was causing birth defects, according to an explosive statement provided by a company insider.

The affidavit by Hubert Woodhouse has never before been made public and reveals how the Sydney managers of British firm Distillers spent months sitting on damning evidence about thalidomide's harmful effects while the drug was still being sold, leading to thousands of avoidable deaths and injuries in Australia and overseas.

Mr Woodhouse also reveals that these managers, led by Distillers' Sydney boss Bill Poole, often held informal meetings in which they would drink whiskey and talk about how the then secret concerns about thalidomide threatened to damage their firm's sales and profits.

The statement is the most damning evidence to be uncovered about the role of Australian pharmaceutical firm managers in the thalidomide scandal. It also demolishes the claim of Distillers that as soon as it was told about the drug's harmful effects, it withdrew it from the market in late 1961.

An estimated 10,000 babies worldwide – including hundreds in Australia – were born in the late 1950s and 1960s with severe physical deformities because their mothers had taken thalidomide drugs, which were marketed as a safe sedative and remedy for morning sickness.

Mr Woodhouse's statement was gathered by



Thalidomide victim Lynette Rowe.

Melbourne lawyer Michael Magazanik, whose book about the scandal, *Silent Shock*, is released on Monday.

Mr Magazanik represented Melbourne woman Lynette Rowe and other thalidomide victims who in 2013 successfully sued the British firm Diageo, which owns Distillers. Ms Rowe was born with no arms or legs after her mother took thalidomide to treat morning sickness.

Mr Woodhouse's statement discloses that by the middle of 1961, five months before the drug was withdrawn, Mr Poole and other senior Distillers staff "definitely" knew about the concerns of Sydney obstetrician William McBride that the drug was causing deformities and death in babies.



Melbourne lawyer Michael Magazanik has written a book about the thalidomide scandal. CRAIG SILLITOE

But rather than warning Australians about the dangers of the drug, Woodhouse says Mr Poole and his colleagues sat on these concerns for five months. During this period, the drug was still being sold and actively promoted to pregnant women.

Mr Woodhouse's affidavit states that during this five months, Mr Poole, national sales manager Fred Strobl and several of their colleagues "often talked about McBride's concerns that thalidomide was causing the deaths of babies and the implications [of this] for the business and our sales".

Mr Woodhouse claims he was also ordered by Mr Poole "not to discuss [Mr McBride's report on thalidomide] with other staff or anyone else".

Mr Magazanik said the affidavit was "the most powerful evidence yet uncovered of how negligence and deceit cost literally thousands of lives in the thalidomide disaster".

"Instead of getting thalidomide off the market immediately, Mr Poole kept promoting a drug he knew might severely damage embryos to maternity hospitals and obstetricians," Mr Magazanik said.

"He also tried to get a government subsidy for thalidomide and steadily built up a stockpile ready to flood the Australian market: 8 million pills in a Sydney warehouse, each one of

which he knew might maim and kill unborn babies. And when thalidomide was exposed, Poole lied constantly to cover up his appalling, deadly behaviour, including telling bare-faced lies to the highest levels of the Australian government."

Mr Poole and Mr Strobl, who became a film star, are both dead.

Mr Magazanik also praised Mr Woodhouse, who is in his 80s and lives in Sydney, for exposing the cover-up.

"We wouldn't know any of this if Mr Woodhouse hadn't had the courage and compassion to tell the full story," he said.

In 2014, the Victorian Supreme Court signed off on a \$89 million class action settlement for thalidomide victims in Australia and New Zealand.

Michael Magazanik's book on the thalidomide scandal, *Silent Shock*, is released on Monday.