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Grünenthal (now GmbH) was a small private company set up after World War Two as an offshoot of an old family firm that made soaps and detergents. Its first pharmaceuticals were produced under foreign license, but thalidomide (which it called Contergan) was its own, a sedative discovered by accident in the spring of 1954 by a 32-year-old chemist and doctor, Heinrich Mückter. To exploit the postwar sleeping-pill boom, Grünenthal marketed it massively from October 1957 as “completely safe,” “completely atoxic,” and free of the unpleasant side effects of barbiturates. The sales department called it “the apple of our eye” because it was so profitable. From 1958 to 1961 they zeroed in on promoting it for use by expectant mothers.

The apology for the tragedy has come from Grünenthal’s new chief executive, Harald Stock, who at the end of last month stood outside the company’s Rhineland offices in the small town of Stolberg to unveil a bronze sculpture of a thalidomide child with foreshortened “flipper” arms. “We ask for forgiveness that for nearly 50 years we didn’t find a way of reaching out to you, human being to human being.”

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The emotion and apparent sincerity was appealing, but in the next breath he made forgiveness impossible. “Grünenthal acted,” he said, “in accordance with the state of scientific knowledge and all industry standards for testing new drugs that were relevant and acknowledged in the 1950s and 1960s.” That was flatly untrue, a product of either deep-rooted cynicism, belying his whole apology, or of appalling ignorance. Grünenthal has propagated the big lie for 50 years, retailing the notion that reproductive tests were unnecessary because nobody could possibly have realized in the fifties that a drug could penetrate the placental barrier and reach the fetus. (Stock and the company did not respond to requests for comment on these charges.)

It is 39 years since, as editor of the *Sunday Times* of London in the early seventies, I was associated with thalidomide investigations. Our survey of the scientific literature, consultations with reputable pharmaceutical companies and independent specialist advice swiftly found that reproductive studies were routinely done in the 1950s, because it was widely recognized that a drug could indeed reach the fetus. The tranquilizers in direct competition with thalidomide were all tested for teratogenic effects and the results published. If reproductive tests had been done on thalidomide, they would not necessarily have shown precisely what deformities would be produced, dependent on the time of ingestion in relation to the development of the fetus, but they would certainly have shown that drugs could endanger unborn children in some way.

We went to see the pharmacologists. An investigative reporter visited the laboratories of Hoffman-LaRoche in New Jersey, producers of Librium, Valium and Mogadon, and checked their records. Reproductive testing had been routine since 1944. So, too, with Lederle, Burroughs Wellcome, Pfizer, SmithKline and ICI in Britain. Dr. G. Edward Paget, director of Inveresk Research Institute, a member of the Medicines Commission and the World Health Organization Expert Committee, and author or joint author of some 48 distinguished publications, said that as a toxicologist, he, and others like him worldwide, were testing drugs on pregnant animals in the fifties. "Any ICI drug likely to be used by pregnant women would have certainly been tested for its effect on pregnant animals." All this we published in the newspaper and in books.

Grünenthal did no single animal test for effects on reproduction, nor did its licensees in 11 European nations and in 7 African, 17 Asian and 11 countries in the Americas selling thalidomide under different trade names. They were led to believe that Grünenthal had done that. In the United States, some 2.5 million doses were distributed, targeting pregnant women, without evidence from a single reproductive test.

Grünenthal made much of subjecting thalidomide "to the usual battery of investigations," but even its animal tests

Hoodwinked is strong language for an academic document but mild by comparison with the German trial judges' summation on Grünenthal testing. "Negligent, misleading, inexcusable, very inadequate by the standards of the day ... The overall behaviour publicly shown by the company did not correspond with the standards required of a serious and conscientious producer of pharmaceuticals."

Deception was the pattern for Chemie Grünenthal. On May 2, 1958, Dr. Augustin Peter Blasiu, who was retained by the company, published the results of using Contergan on 370 patients of whom 160 were nursing (not *expectant*) mothers: "Side effects were not observed either with mothers or babies." Grünenthal distorted Dr. Blasiu's careful report with a cunning promotional letter giving the impression he had tested Contergan on expectant mothers (my italics):

Blasiu did not see this material before a mass mailing. He condemned the Grünenthal letter as "unfair, irresponsible and misleading." His anger made no difference.

Stock might merit forgiveness for an occasional oversight, or a clinical mistake, but Grünenthal, hungry for profits from selling millions of pills, would never face up to what it had done. Even before releasing the drug in October of 1957, it knew that one of its employees had given birth to a baby without ears, a red alert it ignored. From the very earliest days, it brushed aside medical complaints in increasing numbers that their wonder sedative caused peripheral neuritis, irreversible damage to the nervous systems of adults. It suppressed or delayed unfavorable reports about this from doctors by pressuring medical journals, it lied to inquiring doctors, it bribed others to write favorable reports when they had done no testing at all. For four months after an Australian obstetrician connected birth defects with thalidomide, the company continued to sell their poison to mothers, and the mothers produced more malformed babies.

The company, in short, covered up a crime against humanity for more than 60 years.

A few months ago I attended a reunion in London of several hundred British victims. I was moved by their bravery, by their ingenuity and resolve in making the best of their handicapped lives, too many of their bodies failing under the strains. I recognize that Grünenthal has made some monetary compensation, though it is not enough to ensure the very worst affected victims everywhere receive appropriate lifetime care, deprived as they increasingly are by loving parents. But money will not buy absolution. The company should come clean. It must at last dedicate itself to exploring and publicizing the origins of the greatest drug disaster. Thalidomide was incubated in ignorance, fueled by haste, propelled by reckless greed, concealed by deceit. "The unclouded face of truth" must no longer suffer wrong.

PHOTOS: Thalidomide victim Tony Melendez is shown in an undated file photo at age 4 while attending a therapy program at the University of California. REUTERS/File Swiss National Councilor Christian Lohr speaks during a debate in the National Council during the spring parliament session in Bern, March 8, 2012. Lohr was born with disabilities due to a drug based on thalidomide. REUTERS/Michael Buholzer

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