

Thalidomide survivors seeking \$6.8bn

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- Thalidomide victims kick off compensation campaign
- Survivors who suffered birth defects seeking \$6.8 billion
- Maker does not acknowledge claim

THALIDOMIDE victims yesterday began a campaign to win €4billion (\$6.8billion) compensation, 50 years after they were damaged by the drug.

Survivors from around the world marched on the German embassy in London's Belgravia in what they described as a moral crusade. About 3500 victims are still alive.

British victims have reached a settlement and have no complaints against Distillers (now Diageo), the British licensee of the sleeping pill that caused about 10,000 babies to be born with deformities between 1957 and 1962.

Australian obstetrician William McBride alerted the world to the dangers of the drug, in a letter to the medical journal *The Lancet* in 1961. He was later deregistered for scientific fraud related to a separate study, but his whistleblowing on the side effects of thalidomide led to tougher safety standards for similar drugs.

In Germany, where the drug was created, victims get a maximum of £4000 (\$8700) a year, compared with an average of £18,000 in Britain.

In Italy, Spain and Austria, the "thalidomiders" get nothing, according to Nicholas Dobrik, the chairman of the new International Contergan Thalidomide Alliance.

In Germany, the issue was settled in the 1970s with the establishment of a foundation to pay compensation to victims and a law preventing further claims.

The ICTA says this deal was struck with parents exhausted by the task of caring for their damaged children, and assumed the thalidomiders would not live long.

Today, thousands are still alive, aged about 50, the parents who cared for them are dying, and they regard the settlement as derisory. At a press conference yesterday, there were repeated condemnations of Grunenthal, the German drug company that made thalidomide.

The German Government recently agreed to double to about £. 8000 the maximum sum a thalidomider is entitled.

Grunenthal said yesterday it did not acknowledge any basis for the ICTA's demands.

Sebastian Wirtz, the leading member of the family that runs the company, added: "It is unacceptable to join discussions with an organisation that for the past several months has aggressively attacked and tried to damage our company."

The Times