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Thalidomide, a drug capable of causing fetal abnormalities (teratogen), has caused greater than ten thousand birth defects worldwide since its introduction to the market as a pharmaceutical agent. Prior to discovering thalidomide’s teratogenic effects in the early 1960s, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) did not place regulations on drug approval or monitoring as it later did. By 1962, approximately 20,000 patients in the US had taken thalidomide as part of an unregulated clinical trial before any actions were taken to stop thalidomide's distribution. Due to thalidomide's effects on fetuses, both nationally and abroad, the US Congress passed the 1962 Kefauver-Harris Amendments to the 1938 Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act. These amendments imposed guidelines for the process of drug approval in the US and required that a drug be safe as well as effective before it could be approved and marketed. Thalidomide also influenced the FDA's creation of pregnancy categories; a ranking of drugs based on their effects on reproduction and pregnancy. Thalidomide motivated the laws on regulating and monitoring drugs developed in the US and by the FDA in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Ciba, a pharmaceutical company based in Switzerland, first synthesized thalidomide, a sedative similar to barbiturates and derived from glutamic acid, in 1953. Ciba said that it intended to use thalidomide as an anticonvulsive agent, but when the sedative did not show the desired effect on tested lab animals, Ciba stopped its thalidomide research. In October 1957, Wilhelm Kunz of the West German pharmaceutical company Chemie Grünenthal reexamined the compound and found that thalidomide worked as a sleep aid with no apparent side effects or maximum dose. Thalidomide became a popular sleeping pill in West Germany and was sold under the trade name Contergan.

Combined with aspirin, thalidomide was used to treat everything from colds and coughs to asthma and nervousness. Some claimed that thalidomide could help treat loss of vision (macular degeneration), diabetes, autoimmune diseases, and even some forms of cancer. Some recommended a liquid form of thalidomide to calm children. By the late 1950s, thalidomide was marketed in forty-six countries with sales almost as high as those of aspirin. Around this time research indicated that thalidomide relieved morning sickness in pregnant women. Some doctors recommended the off-label use of thalidomide to pregnant women, and soon this recommendation was generalized to pregnant women in forty-eight countries.

In 1960, a number of reports of nerve inflammation (peripheral neuritis) associated with long-term use of thalidomide surfaced in German medical journals. In early 1961, the pediatrician Widukind Lenz in Germany noticed thalidomide's teratogenic effects and later hypothesized that prenatal exposure to thalidomide caused severe malformations in newborns. Based on initial questionnaires sent to the parents of deformed infants and their physicians, Lenz noticed that approximately twenty percent of the mothers surveyed had taken thalidomide during pregnancy. Lenz then asked all of the parents specifically about thalidomide, and half of them reported using the drug.

On 15 November 1961, Lenz reported his findings and suspicion of thalidomide's teratogenicity to Chemie Grünenthal, and at a pediatric meeting on 20 November, he announced his suspicion. Independent of Lenz's hypothesis, obstetrician William McBride, working in Australia, noticed severe birth defects in the babies whose mothers had taken thalidomide during gestation. The most common birth defects included shortened, absent, or extra arms or legs (dysmelia), incomplete development of extremities (bone hypoplasia), and a variety of ear, heart, and internal organ defects. In 1961 McBride reported his findings to Distillers Company Limited laboratories, headquartered in Edinburgh, Scotland, the company that produced thalidomide for the UK. Within the few years after thalidomide was first marketed, greater than 10,000 babies worldwide were born with birth defects attributed to thalidomide. By March 1962 many countries had banned thalidomide.

In 1960, the limited liability corporation Richardson-Merrell applied to the US FDA, headquartered in Maryland, for approval to sell Kevadon, the company's trade name for thalidomide. The company hoped to approve thalidomide as an over-the-counter drug and recommended it to treat a variety of ailments including alcoholism, anorexia, asthma, cancer, poor schoolwork, premature ejaculation, and tuberculosis. The application went to Frances Kelsey, a physician and pharmacologist at the FDA. Kelsey noticed reports of thalidomide's adverse effects in Germany. Because one of thalidomide's recommended uses was treating morning sickness, Kelsey requested more data from Richardson-Merrell to show that thalidomide was safe for use during pregnancy.

At the same time that Kelsey requested more information, the Democratic Senator from Tennessee Estes Kefauver was independently conducting an investigation of the drug industry in the US. As part of his investigation, Kefauver introduced a bill to enhance safety regulations of drugs. Kefauver learned about thalidomide's effects abroad through the work of Helen B. Taussig, a John Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland, professor and pediatric cardiologist. In a 1962 Scientific American...
In the mid-1960s, thalidomide research continued. In 1965, physician Jacob Sheskin, working in Israel, used thalidomide as a sedative for patients suffering from erythema nodosum leprosum lesions, an inflammatory complication associated with leprosy that affects about 100 to 200 people in the US annually. In addition to being an effective sedative, thalidomide also augments immune responses to pathogens in people who take it. Experts from a variety of disciplines recognized thalidomide's potential in treating immunological, rheumatologic, hematologic, and oncologic disorders. Some argued that the drug would help treat throat and oral ulcers in patients infected with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and that it would help counteract the massive weight loss associated with Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). Studies found that more than half of patients with these throat and oral ulcers had completely healed after four weeks of using thalidomide, and almost ninety percent had partially healed.

In 1975, the FDA approved thalidomide to treat leprosy under limited conditions. With many medical subdisciplines requesting permission to test and use thalidomide, the FDA formed a Thalidomide Working Group in 1994 to develop consent forms and patient information brochures. In 1995, the FDA met with pharmaceutical companies that wanted to apply for approval to market thalidomide. Biomedical researchers wanted to test thalidomide's efficacy in clinical trials on conditions such as AIDS wasting syndrome. Furthermore, AIDS activists, who often didn't want to wait for trial results, lobbied the FDA to allow AIDS patients to use the drug.

The FDA allowed marketing of thalidomide by Celgene Inc., a New Jersey pharmaceutical company on 16 July 1998. Together, Celgene and the FDA developed the System for Thalidomide Education and Prescribing Safety (STEPS) program. This program required registration by physicians who prescribed thalidomide, as well as their patients. The program also insisted on a number of contraceptive measures such as proof of an initial negative pregnancy test prior to treatment, proof that the patient was using two forms of contraception, and submission of monthly pregnancy tests. The FDA placed Thalidomide under Category X of the FDA's pregnancy ratings, categories created in 1975 for pharmaceutical companies to label medications according to their affects on reproduction. The fifth and most severe rating, Category X, is for drugs that empirically contribute to fetal deformities, and for drugs whose risks or undesired effects outweigh possible benefits to the patient. This pregnancy rating and the STEPS program later served as a foundation for the FDA's response to isotretinoin (Accutane), a prescription drug used to treat severe acne. Like thalidomide, isotretinoin caused severe birth defects and prompted its manufacturer and the FDA to create a risk management program to prevent fetal exposure.
In July 1998, the FDA approved the marketing of thalidomide, and today the drug is used to treat inflammation associated with leprosy and also acts as a chemotherapeutic agent for patients with cancer of the plasma cells in bone marrow (multiple myeloma). Thalidomide is available through the US Public Health Service Commissioned Corps, headquartered in Washington, DC.

While thalidomide prompted the US government to extend the powers of the FDA with respect to drug approval and monitoring powers, amendments subsequent to those in 1962 have further extended the FDA's system of regulation[8]. In 1976 amendments to the Medical Device Regulation Act required medical device manufacturers to register with the FDA and follow quality control guidelines. Similarly, the 1990 Nutrition Labeling and Education Act required all packaged foods to contain standardized nutritional information and standardized information on serving sizes.

Sources


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