

The Contergan Scandal

The name Contergan stands for the biggest medicinal drug scandal in recent German history. Introduced as a sleeping and tranquilizing medication in 1957, Contergan rose to saddening fame primarily because of its teratogenic effects. In the Federal Republic of Germany, where it was most frequently used, between 4,000 and 5,000 children were born with birth defects, primarily (but not only) affecting the limbs, after their mothers had taken the over-the-counter medication, which was praised as completely harmless. Roughly 10,000 children were affected worldwide. When the negative effects were announced to the public in late November 1961, the producer was compelled to withdraw the medication from the market. As has since become common knowledge, the producer was in possession of reports about several thousand cases of nerve damage (polyneuropathy), some of which were irreversible and affected primarily elderly patients who had taken the drug over extended periods of time. After being withdrawn from the market, Contergan rose to the status of a social scandal that attracted more media attention than virtually any other issue during the 1960s and remains an issue of concern within the medical and scientific communities today. The subsequent effects of the Contergan scandal on society were massive. They led not only to a fundamental reassessment of the laws regarding medicinal drugs but also heightened public awareness of environmental risks and promoted changes in society's treatment of people with disabilities.