

Thalidomide victims launch lawsuit

By Sarah Farnsworth

Updated Fri Oct 29, 2010 4:49pm AEDT

Five Victorians are suing the German drug company responsible for the drug thalidomide, which was sold in Australia more than 50 years ago.

The drug, introduced as a sedative for pregnant woman, was originally distributed by The Distillers Company in the 1950s.

Grunenthal GmbH developed and sold the drug, which caused severe birth defects, such as foreshortened limbs, in many children.

A writ to be served on Grunenthal claims it should have known the drug was not adequately tested.

It says the drug should not have been marketed as "completely safe" when it went on sale in Australia between 1957 and 1961.

The writ states that five years before thalidomide was withdrawn from sale, Grunenthal received reports of birth deformities linked to the drug.

The company is accused of ignoring the reports, intimidating people who complained and failing to admit the drug caused birth defects.

When it was taken off shelves, the manufacturer claimed it was due to bad publicity.

Lawyer Peter Gordon and the firm Slater and Gordon are accusing Grunenthal of negligence for allowing the drug to be sold without proper testing, representing it as completely safe, and failing to withdraw the drug from the market after discovering the potential risks it posed.

Janelle Robbins from Woodend is leading the class action suit against the company.

She suffered birth deformities after being exposed to thalidomide while in her mother's womb.

Ms Robbins is seeking loss and damages, along with four other complainants: Virginia Edwards from Hawthorn, Peter Civitella from Seabrook, Timothy Loughry from St Kilda and Robert Philip Charls from Altona North.

All five say the drug caused thalidomide conditions, such as deformed limbs, damage to the nervous system and kidney and heart injuries.

They are all likely to suffer reduced life expectancy.

The class action follows the recent successful settlement with the British group Diageo for 45 Australian and New Zealand thalidomiders.

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Thalidomide was on sale in Australia between 1957 and 1961. (Reuters)

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