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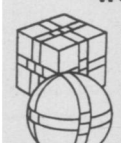
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## MEDICINE

### Check Other Drugs to Trace Deformities

➤ THERE IS NO question that the rise in number of cases of phocomelia, the disease characterized by seal-like deformity in arms and legs in the newborn, has arisen from some new drug, doctors believe, but is thalidomide the only one?

Up to the last year or so, the rate of birth of phocomelia-affected babies in Germany was three out of 100,000, Dr. Gunter Grupp, Cincinnati University College of Medicine, told SCIENCE SERVICE. After the widespread use of thalidomide by 1961, the rate had risen to 34 out of 100,000. Now a study by five German physicians has been undertaken to prove whether or not thalidomide is the only cause.

"If all the so-called 'negative cases' are really negative, we are in trouble," Dr. Grupp said. "Thalidomide has been taken from the market in Germany, but women who report taking half a dozen other drugs and no thalidomide leave pharmacologists mystified."

One of the German doctors who is a major authority on thalidomide effects, Dr. Widukind Lenz, Hamburg University, recently visited Dr. Grupp, himself a professor at the University of Freiberg until he came to Cincinnati in 1958. Dr. Lenz believes that in spite of phocomelia appearing before thalidomide, there is something new in the type of deformity due to thalidomide.

Dr. C. E. Petersen of the University of Kiel, Germany, however, has checked out ten cases believed to have not taken thalidomide and is convinced the mothers did not have the drug.

Dr. Grupp recently returned from a 1,700-mile tour of medical centers in 14 German cities. He found that in all places where the patients had been carefully studied, there were always more than 25 per cent in which a history of thalidomide could not be found.

"This means that some of the women did not know they had taken thalidomide, I believe," Dr. Grupp said. "Hospitals, doctors and all contacts, even a grandmother in the home who may have slipped the drug to the pregnant woman, must be checked and double-checked. In the meantime, we are advising no pregnant woman to take any kind of drug, even aspirin, which has been safely used for 45 years."

The other three doctors studying causes of phocomelia in Germany are: Profs. H. R. Wiedemann of Kiel, Wilhelm von Massenbach of Luebeck and Wolfgang Nitzsch of Hanover.

Causes of deformities in four babies in this country, said to be unrelated to thalidomide, are being studied by the National Institute of Blindness and Neurological Diseases. Ten cases in the entire country are believed by the Food and Drug Administration to have been caused by this drug.

A study in cooperation with 15 hospitals, colleges and medical centers throughout the country was started in 1958 by the National Institutes of Health in an effort to discover causes of birth defects that cause one baby out of 16 to be abnormal in some way.

• Science News Letter, 82:316 November 17, 1962

# Questions

ASTRONOMY—How was the temperature of Saturn estimated? p. 317.

INVENTION—What new weapon has been invented to protect skin divers from dangerous fish? p. 318.

MEDICINE—How are migraine headaches recognized? p. 320.

METEOROLOGY—How will global weather be simulated on the new computer? p. 315.

PHYSICS—In at least how many countries are nuclear power plants now operating? p. 322.

PUBLIC SAFETY—How many people can be accommodated by Moscow's subway bomb shelters? p. 319.

SPACE—How are the light beacons on Anna activated? p. 317.

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