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Thalidomide

Labor backs official apology for thalidomide survivors

An inquiry also recommended affected families receive compensation and payments towards ongoing care



▲ A parliamentary inquiry has recommended the government apologise to families affected by thalidomide and provide compensation. Photograph: Mike Derer/Associated Press

Labor has called on the government to endorse a national apology to Australians born without limbs and life-long disabilities as a result of the thalidomide scandal, one of the world's worst pharmaceutical failures.

A parliamentary inquiry into the treatment of thalidomide survivors has recommended the federal government apologise to affected families and provide compensation and ongoing payments towards their health needs.

The Labor leader, Bill Shorten, wrote to Scott Morrison in support of national recognition for survivors.

"We owe the Australian survivors and their families the respect and recognition of a national apology," he said in a statement. "It's time for the parliament to say sorry to all those who were devastated by this pharmaceutical disaster."

The final report, released on Friday, said the government had a "moral obligation" to survivors.

Thalidomide survivor Lisa McManus **told the ABC** she was delighted with the outcome after a five-year campaign.

"We feel it is a bit of a victory, not just for us as survivors but a victory for all people that have been affected - our mums and our dads, our brothers and sisters, those who are still out in the community that haven't been identified and those who have died before their time," she told ABC TV.

Thalidomide was the active ingredient in a sleeping pill that was distributed for sale in Australia by Distillers between August 1960 and November 1961. It was also used to treat morning sickness.

Unsuspecting pregnant women later discovered that taking even one tablet had the capacity to cause malformation of limbs, facial features and internal organs in their children.

The report noted some survivors had severely debilitating congenital injuries, nerve pain and symptoms of early onset ageing.

This year Canada doubled the size of the support it offers survivors to A\$1.05m a year. Germany, Japan and the UK also have national support schemes.

But Australian governments have provided little financial assistance to survivors apart from tax relief. The inquiry was told about 20% of thalidomide survivors would not be disabled if Australian governments had taken appropriate steps to recall the products from sale.

"The response of Australian governments ... was both slow and lacklustre by comparison to other countries," the report said.

The New Zealand government had issued a directive to seize the drug from chemist and hospital shelves but there was no immediate action in Australia.

The inquiry noted the German pharmaceutical company Grünenthal, which released the drug globally, appeared to have done nothing to assist Australian survivors.

The report recommended the national disability insurance scheme change the way it deals with survivors and a coordination centre be set up.

Greens senator Jordan Steele-John said it was vital the report recommendations were adopted without delay.

"All these people have ever known is failure from their government both to protect their parents from the dangers of thalidomide and to support them as adults," he said.

"This failure must be acknowledged and it must end today."

Comment has been sought from Morrison and health minister, Greg Hunt.



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