

SENATE INQUIRY INTO THALIDOMIDE USE IN AUSTRALIA

Submission by [REDACTED], sister of [REDACTED],
Thalidomide Victim.

Terms Of Reference:

I wish to address the role of the Australian Government in compensation and support.

Summary:

- The horrendous bullying of my brother.
- The terrible guilt of my mother.
- Time for the Australian Government to finally accept its responsibility and offer compensation and support.

I was very young when I first knew of my brother being different. He and mum would leave our home and travel to Sydney for operations to 'fix' his ear. Later operations were supposed to 'fix' his 'deformity'. I know mum gave her ear to help with the 'fixing'. I missed them greatly when they left but understood very little of what was happening. There was very little discussion.

Although [REDACTED] was born 'different' he tried his hardest to be normal. He was a very kind, good natured soul. I feel he was somewhat sheltered at the small country school he attended until Year 5. Moving to a large public school in the City of Orange meant he wasn't so sheltered. He was taunted by cruel comments and called terrible names by a school captain and this set the tone. My mum remembers him being chased at the bus stop so dirt could be thrown at him.

Moving to a large public high school the cruelty got worse. [REDACTED] a gentle soul, had to learn to fight to protect himself. The thought of my kind brother having to protect himself with his fists was sickening. He remembers one day being mid-fight and wondering how he was going to survive this one when a kind girl yelled 'Go [REDACTED]', this gave him just something to keep fighting and protecting himself. Why? Because he looked different.

These weren't the days of a 'One Punch Can Kill' campaign. Bullying wasn't spoken about much. Yet my brother had to endure endless bullying and many punches to his face, any of which could have been fatal. One girl would walk past [REDACTED] and fake scream as if she had just seen a monster, just one example.

After high school [REDACTED] moved from place to place and job to job, trying to find his place in the world. When trying to move into areas of work other than physical labour, the discrimination was evident. He didn't have the look. Positions were even terminated.

It then became apparent that his thalidomide affected body could no longer endure the strains of ongoing physical labour.

There were years of desperate loneliness and at times I felt that no human should have to be so alone. For a time alcohol offered some comfort but the hazards of that type of solace became apparent and fortunately he was able to break that dependency.

Thalidomide cast a very dark cloud over the families of those affected. It has been a cruel curse. For [REDACTED] the mental cruelty came before the mental and physical cruelty. [REDACTED] was admitted to a psychiatric hospital when the lines between the two became blurred. There were times when I wished I could trade places and just share some of the torturous barbs. Each time someone asked me about my brother I felt I had been stabbed. The dark cloud was because we just wanted a normal life for him and for the dark cloud to move on.

For [REDACTED] having children and a family life meant the cloud had temporarily lifted but then the physical break down of his body caused by the drug began to worsen. That and the worry of how his children will be looked after if he isn't able to look after them has become a huge concern to him.

[REDACTED] will never escape the bullying. Where he lives a neighbour told him to move a legally parked car, this person attempted to exert his 'self-believed' authority over [REDACTED] and when [REDACTED] didn't explain to him the cause of his disfigurement he became a bully of the worst type. [REDACTED] was accustomed to being treated like a second class citizen but this became something else. He yells at [REDACTED] "Have you had your 'meds' today?" Manure was thrown on [REDACTED] house and plants were stolen. The Police came to [REDACTED] house to look for child pornography that this person said existed in his house. The house he was trying to make into a loving home for his little family. [REDACTED] is one of the most honourable people I have ever known and of course the Police found nothing but how could they enter his home for no reason except for the sickening harassment of adult bullies. Of course when I made calls to the Police and other authorities for some kind of protection for [REDACTED] the answer was indeed 'No that is not possible'. He doesn't use his front yard at all because these people believe it's ok to harass someone who is different.

On a different occasion a Police Officer, in uniform, confronted [REDACTED] and demanded to know why he looked different. The authorities in this country have certainly done nothing to protect or assist my brother.

We know the people affected by the drug have had enough of the suffering. The suffering won't stop but they deserve assistance to continue with the fight of their lives, which is just every day living.

I know my mum has lived with the guilt of having taken that drug every day since [REDACTED] was born. The look in her eyes and on her face makes it evident. A mother's love became a mother's guilt because of disgraceful decision making by the Australian Government. There were opportunities for the Government to handle the decision making process very differently.

The 'institution' of the Australian Government then and the Australian Government now is the same. The members are different and our hope is that now the Government has the opportunity to 'regard' Thalidomide again, that it will do so in a very different manner.

The small number of people demanding compensation and support deserve the respect of the Australian Government. The institution that allowed the intolerable suffering to occur must now ensure that the ongoing suffering, which is worsening, is eased, never fixed, by compensation and support.

We can spend time wondering about what [REDACTED] childhood and life would have been like if he hadn't been affected by thalidomide, which really is a waste of time, or we can in the first instance make the Australian Government acknowledge their mandatory role in compensation and support.

When describing a civilised society it has to be one that can acknowledge past mistakes and though unable to change its history, can compensate for suffering – historic and ongoing. The British Government admitted its role in causing suffering for those affected by thalidomide and behaved as a civilised society should with compensation and support. Other Governments have done the same. Particularly as a Commonwealth nation and identifying our Governance somewhat in line with that nation, it becomes irresponsible and roguish to believe there is no role to play.