

## BOOK REVIEW

**Anatole Baldacchino, *The Malta Thalidomide Affair*,  
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The due acknowledgment must be made that modern-day medicine has positively impacted humanity in general. The average longevity, for instance, has increased in a number of countries, particularly those that are affluent. Modern-day medicine has also mitigated, or otherwise eradicated, a number of illnesses and other medical conditions.

However, modern day medicine has its dark side, which at least in part is caused by the greed of those running the pharmaceutical industry. Oftentimes, dangerous or otherwise unsafe or inappropriate medicine would adversely impact the health and well-being (or life itself) of those persons taking such medicine. In turn, this could also be emotionally devastating to their significant others, such as parents and siblings. The Thalidomide scandal is a particular case in point. This scandal is deemed by a number of scholars to be one of the worst medical disasters in human history. Originating in the 1950s by Grunnenthal Gmbh, Thalidomide, in its original guise, was deemed to be a wonder drug. Expectant mothers were particularly targeted by this pharmaceutical entity,

which promised that this drug could mitigate the effects of 'morning sickness.' This pharmaceutical company went so far as its advertisements proclaimed to the effect that should children accidentally ingest the drug, the only side effect would be that they would fall asleep. As events transpired, these claims not only proved to be unfounded but that the drug eventually left its horrible mark in human history for being one of the most dangerous drugs that was ever allowed in circulation. Decades later, variants of this drug are still in circulation, but this time round are being employed to good effect in treating conditions such as cancer and leprosy, however, care must still be exercised when administering this drug.

Grunnenthal GmbH had its lion's share of the Thalidomide scandal. It failed to perform rigorous tests that would ensure the safety of the drug prior to its marketing. There were a number of complaints, including by some of its employees, that this drug could induce stillbirths or severe deformities in infants. The claims were dismissed by the management of this pharmaceutical company as being 'acts of God.' Matters were exacerbated by this pharmaceutical company sending no less than 66000 letters to German doctors that stated to the effect that Thalidomide was safe. It also went as far as to hire private investigators to track down any doctors who expressed reservations about this drug. The proverbial cherry on the cake was the decision to export the drug to a number of countries around the world, which was also complicated by the fact that there were the Distillers Biochemicals Company Ltd produced the drug under license.

The spreading of Thalidomide developed a life of its own. This holds so true in the Maltese context. In his book named 'The Malta Thalidomide Affair', Baldacchino (2023) explains that there were a number of interrelated factors that led to its introduction in Malta and its delays in having it removed from circulation. One primary factor is that the colonial power at that time, the British Empire, was more concerned with shifting power to the Maltese parliament. The Maltese government at that time missed a golden opportunity to have the drug removed in the early 1960s. The Minister of Health at that time ignored the pleas by Dom Mintoff (then Leader of the Opposition party) during a parliamentary sitting in September 1962 to have the drug removed and destroyed. There were also gaps in legislation related to the sale of potentially dangerous drugs. In stark contrast to what happened in England, Maltese medical professionals decided to keep the issue under the carpet rather than actively collecting the drug from customers.

To conclude, greed and associated malpractice by pharmaceutical companies would entail a number of consequences. It could give rise to mistrust and perhaps anxiety about the safety and effectiveness of medicine. It could also lead to the disrepute of the pharmaceutical industry in general without discriminating against those who engage in best practices or otherwise. However, those who could potentially end up suffering the most are those people who end up taking medicine that is unsafe or inappropriate due to malpractice by defaulting pharmaceutical entities, which could

lead to adverse impact on their health or even their lives (which in some cases could extend to unborn children).