



Broken and left to dye

Drug giant won't help victims

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ABOUT 60,000 Australians crippled by a risky medical practice have been declined help by the world's third-largest drug company.

Pharmaceutical giant GlaxoSmithKline marketed for more than 40 years an X-ray dye that has been linked to arachnoiditis, a painful condition that fuses the spinal nerves together.

A parliamentary committee last month demanded GlaxoSmithKline set up a charitable foundation to help those patients left crippled and incontinent by the condition.

But the company has rejected the recommendation, claiming "GSK considers it has acted responsibly at all times in regard to the supply of Myodil. We believe that it would not be appropriate for GSK to be responsible for establishing a charitable foundation as recommended by the committee".

Between 1945 and 1987 a dye manufactured by GlaxoSmithKline was injected into the backs of tens of thousands of Australians before they had a spinal X-ray.

The dye was linked to arachnoiditis as early as 1951 and, by 1971, GSK included a precautionary warning about the risk on its prescribing information sheet for doctors.

Medical experts who gave evidence to a parliamentary inquiry have compared the case with the harm caused by tobacco giants or asbestos products manufactured by James Hardie.

While the drug company said it has "the utmost empathy" for people afflicted by arachnoiditis, it would not help them.

Liberal MP Steve Irons, who helped set up the inquiry into the condition, said he was "not surprised" at the drug company's response.

"I am, however, surprised at the speed of their response — it seems they had made their mind up and have not given it a lot of thought," Mr Irons said.

"The frustrations and damage the sufferers have been having for decades will continue . . . there seems to be no hope for them."

The company, which sponsors charities all over the world, should have "stepped up as a corporate citizen" and set one up to help the arachnoiditis victims, Mr Irons said.

Max Scott, who is reliant on a wheelchair after being injected with a similar X-ray dye to Myodil, said he was "disgusted" by GSK's response.

"I feel absolutely and completely deserted. I'm sitting here in this wheelchair, wearing a nappy, because I've got no control over my bowels and bladder. It's not fun," he said.