



Still waiting for help

Drug giant told to set up charity

EXCLUSIVE
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THEY are the forgotten Australians – 60,000 victims of a medical practice that has left them crippled with pain, paralysed and incontinent.

This week they enjoyed a rare ray of light when Federal Parliament said they deserved the support of the drug company linked to their suffering.

GlaxoSmithKline, which for 42 years marketed a dye used in an X-ray procedure connected to their pain, has been told to set up a charitable foundation to help.

But while the pharmaceutical giant told *The Sunday Mail* it was “considering” the parliamentary report’s recommendations, it has not yet committed to providing help.

Medical experts who gave evidence to a parliamentary inquiry have compared the case to the harm caused by tobacco giants and asbestos company James Hardie.

“I sit back and think: cigarettes, mesothelioma – I go through it all. These people have suffered mainly because they were using a dye, Myodil, with no alternative,” Professor Michael Sage, past president of the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Radiologists, told the inquiry.

From 1945 to 1987 tens of thousands of Australians were injected with a dye during an

X-ray procedure called a myelogram, which was then the only way for doctors to see the spine clearly before surgery.

The Federal Government, state health authorities and doctors sanctioned the use of the chemical even though they knew evidence had emerged in medical journals as early as the 1950s that it was linked to the condition arachnoiditis.

The condition is caused by the inflammation and fusion of the nerves and membranes of the spinal cord and is estimated to have affected about 1 per cent of patients.

Pain expert Professor Michael Cousins told the inquiry victims suffered pain that was burning and “like bolts of electricity”.

Patients can also experience loss of muscle function, paraplegia, incontinence, and sensations such as ants crawling on the skin or having hot water poured on one’s legs. Many are wheelchair-bound.

The Sunday Mail exposed the issue of spinal injections in 2002 and it was raised in Federal Parliament but the plight of victims was ignored even though the government’s own medical regulator had evaluated the dye and approved it for marketing.

Liberal MP Steve Irons pushed for a parliamentary

investigation after being approached by a constituent. He said it was time for GSK to “act like a good corporate citizen” and set up a charitable foundation to help the victims.

“Where you take no responsibility it smacks of the tobacco industry’s approach to smoking and cancer,” he said.

The inquiry said it had no power to order GSK to pay the victims’ compensation – that was a matter for the courts.

In 2000 GSK settled a class action from 140 Australian dye victims out of court and the payouts were confidential.

In a statement this week GSK said it “had the utmost sympathy for the people who have been, and are, afflicted by arachnoiditis” and believed it had “acted responsibly at all times in relation to the supply of myodil”. “Arachnoiditis is a complex condition that may be caused by . . . spinal infections, surgery and trauma.”

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LIBERAL MP STEVE IRONS