Contergan is the West German trade name for thalidomide. The chemical structure is shown in Figure 7. Thalidomide is a synthetic drug which, as the story is told in West Germany, was first conceived and made by Ciba and found by them to have no effect on animals; therefore, it was discarded. In 1958 Grünenthal developed the drug and tried it on animals; they, too, found it had no effect on animals. Thereupon it occurred to the inventors that it might be useful in epilepsy and was marketed as an anticonvulsant drug. It was soon found to be worthless for epilepsy but it caused sleep. Thereafter, it was sold as a sleeping tablet, a sedative, and tranquilizer. It had a prompt action, gave a natural deep sleep and no hangover. It appeared innocent and safe. Man could not commit suicide with it. It became West Germany's most popular sleeping tablet and was widely used in hospitals and in mental institutions. Thalidomide was added as a sedative to other drugs such as algosediv (thalidomide and acetylsalicylic acid), peracon expectorans, grippex, and polygripan; thus it was used for grippe, neuralgia, asthma, and as a cough medicine. A liquid form was made for children. It was used in hospitals to quiet a child for an electroencephalogram. It became West Germany's baby-sitter. It was also found useful as an antiemetic in pregnancy. The drug was manufactured "by the ton" and sold without prescription. Inasmuch as the drug was cheap and an excellent sedative, the sale was tremendous. The rights to market the drug were sold to pharmaceutical firms in other countries. In the British Commonwealth it was marketed by Distillers (Biochemicals) as Distaval. In Portugal it was sold as Softenon and it was manufactured in the United States as Kevadon (but it was never passed by our Food and Drug Administration). It was sold both as Kevadon and Talimol in Canada. Thalidomide was also added to the English drugs known as Valgis, Tensival, Valgraine, and Asmaval. I do not know whether the drug was added to any Portugese preparations.

In April, 1961, a new form of polyneuritis appeared: tingling of the hands, sensory disturbance, and later, atrophy of the thumb and motor disturbances. It was soon recognized that the long continued use of Contergan in adults was responsible for polyneuritis; furthermore, unless the drug was promptly discontinued, the polyneuritis was irreversible. Thereafter, the drug was placed upon prescription. Nevertheless, it remained a very popular drug and continued to be widely used in hospitals and also in the home.

As previously stated, on Nov. 8 it occurred to Dr. Lenz that Contergan was probably responsible for the catastrophic outbreak of phocomelia. On Nov. 15 he warned Grüenthal that he suspected Contergan was the cause of phocomelia and that the drug should be withdrawn. On Nov. 20, 1961, at the Düsseldorf Pediatric Meeting, Lenz (5) reported he suspected a specific drug was the cause of the "Wiedemann syndrome" and that he had warned the company that the drug should be withdrawn. He did not name the drug. That night a physician came up to him and said, "Will you tell me confidentially, is the drug Contergan? I ask because we have such a child and my wife took Contergan." In the next few days he received a half dozen letters asking the same question and saying, "My wife took Contergan and we have such a child." A couple of days later it was generally known among the doctors that Contergan was the drug under suspicion. On Nov. 26 Grüenthal withdrew the drug from the market. On Nov. 28 the Ministry of Health issued a firm but cautious statement that Contergan was suspected to be a major factor in the production of phocomelia and stated that the drug had been withdrawn from the market. Women were warned not to take the drug. The announcement was carried on the front page of every newspaper, on the radio, and on television.

Phocomelia not only suddenly appeared in Germany, but the same unusual type of malformation equally suddenly made its appearance in Australia. In April, 1961, Dr. W. G. McBride (6) in a relatively short time saw 3 babies born with severe phocomelia. He saw no more such infants until the fall of 1961. In October and November, 1961, he saw 3 more such infants. Thereupon he reviewed the 6 cases and he found that all 6 mothers had received Distaval in early pregnancy. Dr. McBride communicated his findings to the Australian Branch of Distillers Limited and they in turn cabled their London office on Nov. 27, 1961. Distaval is the English trade name for Contergan. Thus, within a couple of days the English firm received similar reports from 2 widely separated countries. The drug was promptly withdrawn from the market. The latest report is that it is available to hospitals in limited sales.