

This is why the government called the committee. It will hear evidence from experts in many spheres and their advice will be of great help in formulating future government policy.

The thalidomide tragedy has spurred us all to greater action. The government, as you know, not only introduced new legislation, but also made plans for strengthening the food and drug directorate.

Last August, I announced to the provinces that the government stood ready to share the cost of rehabilitation of thalidomide victims. Since then, a number of fact-finding groups have been working to add to federal and provincial knowledge of the problems in this sphere. The expert committee on habilitation reported last week, and copies were tabled in the house.

There is one point that should be stressed—the problem of drug controls, and the constant exchange of technical information that is needed to make such controls completely effective, is not Canada's alone. Nations in many parts of the world have turned their attention to it in recent months.

Before the thalidomide stories had gained prominence in our newspapers, the Canadian Government took action that could have far-reaching results.

It initiated and co-sponsored a special resolution on drugs at the World Health General Assembly in Geneva.

It is hoped that the resolution will lead to an improvement in the exchange of drug information among nations of the world, and further the standardization of procedures regarding new drugs.

Prompt, world-wide exchange of information of new drug developments would help to a great degree in preventing the recurrence of a thalidomide tragedy.

In this opening statement I would like to wish members of this committee every success in their deliberations. They have taken on an onerous task, the completion of which should result in great benefit to all Canadians.

Mr. Chairman and gentlemen, I might just add that naturally I will be available and will be at the committee's beck and call at any time it might wish to have me before it. It does happen that other meetings are frequently held on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and at certain times perhaps I could be excused from this committee's meetings although I will always be available for questioning. I am wondering whether this will be satisfactory, and I make this request so that you will appreciate why I perhaps am not present at every meeting of this special committee.

The CHAIRMAN: I would think that would be satisfactory. Is this agreeable to the committee?

Some Hon. MEMBERS: Agreed.

The CHAIRMAN: Gentlemen, has anyone any questions to ask?

Mr. ORLIKOW: Mr. Chairman, I should like to ask the minister several questions. First of all, I have had some correspondence with people in the field such as doctors, who are still concerned as to whether the department actually has the authority to order the withdrawal temporarily or permanently of a drug which has been approved, but in respect of which in latter stages there may be new evidence indicating there are difficulties. It has been said again and again by people in the field that this was a primary difficulty in respect of thalidomide, and that after some information was available which should have indicated that at least the use of the drug should be temporarily suspended, it was not because the department had to work more or less by voluntary co-operation and that the department therefore waited because of certain uncertainties. Certainly we would all hope that there would not be a recurrence of what happened with this drug, but if there were another incident like this, does the law, as it is now written, give the department the authority to order a drug company to halt the distribution and to withdraw immediately all the drugs which have been investigated?