

How Much for Broken Lives?

Indictments in the Heinz-Remedia baby formula scandal bring little relief to broken families

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WHEN INBAR WAS BORN at Sheba hospital in Tel Hashomer on January 30, 2003, she weighed 3.28 kilos, says her mother, Liran, a soft-spoken 21-year-old. The father, Ofer, 32, recalls Inbar's high marks on her post-birth Apgar test, which measures babies' alertness. "Life was wonderful. Our future looked rosy," says Ofer wistfully.

Indeed, Inbar, the first grandchild for Liran's parents, blossomed into a bright, inquisitive, pretty baby girl, standing and babbling at seven months. But today Liran and Ofer (who ask that their last name not be used), speak of shattered lives, inconsolable guilt, grief and frustration. Now, back at Sheba, they sit beside each other on a narrow bed in the children's rehabilitation wing and take turns holding and caressing their once-effervescent daughter, suctioning saliva from her mouth by tube.

Two months short of her second birthday, Inbar is blind, deaf and permanently brain damaged, unable to swallow or walk. She underwent a gastrostomy, a surgically created opening in the stomach to allow for a feeding tube; and a tracheotomy, an opening through the neck into the trachea, helps her breathe. "Her life is one of hell," says Ofer. "And to sit in the hospital and watch her suffer is unbearable."

A year after their nightmare began, as the district attorney is considering the police's recommendation to prosecute the people allegedly responsible, Liran and Ofer are sitting with their lawyers as well, fighting for satisfactory compensation to help them cope.

Inbar is the most damaged victim of the Heinz-Remedia defective soy baby formula scandal, which rocked Israel a year ago, claiming the lives of two infants, causing serious injury — in some cases permanent — to some 15 other babies and developmental delays in an as yet undetermined number. Inbar is the only Remedia baby still left in the hospital.

The tragedy was caused by elimination of the vital B1 vitamin (thiamine) from a soy baby formula that Inbar and some 5,000 other Israeli babies had been drinking. The product — manufactured for the Israeli-American Heinz-Remedia Industries Ltd. by Humana-Milchunion, near Hanover, Germany, and

marketed as "Remedia Super Soya 1" — was discovered to contain less than 10 percent of the quantity of B1 listed on the container label. Deficiency in infants of B1, essential for the development of babies' central nervous systems, leads to vomiting, diarrhea and seizures. If not reversed — usually by emergency shots of B1 — it can bring on two potentially fatal diseases: encephalopathy, an inflammatory degenerative brain disease, and beriberi, which results in damage to the heart and nervous system. The reason for the change in formula remains under investigation.

Remedia was founded in 1962 by Naomi and Moshe Miller of Tel Aviv and became, in 1991, the exclusive Israel agent for baby food produced by Heinz Inc., the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania food giant. In 1999 Heinz, whose website proudly advertises that it received kosher status from the New York-based Orthodox Union as far back as 1923, acquired a 51-percent stake in Remedia. Until the scandal broke, Heinz-Remedia had a commanding 62 percent of the solid baby food market and 37 percent of the formula market in Israel. These days Heinz-Remedia is slowly recovering, with a 10-percent share of the formula market (it no longer makes a soy brand), and 40 percent of the solid baby food business.

When the scandal first broke, Humana insisted its formula was nutritionally sound. But within days, it performed a volte-face. Albert Grosse Frie, spokesperson for Humana, accepted responsibility, opaquely calling the vitamin deficiency a "chain of unfortunate events." Humana fired employees. German authorities began an investigation, which is still going on. So did the Israel Police. In mid-November, the Central District's fraud division announced it would recommend bringing indictments against Heinz-Remedia CEO Gidi Landsberger, on suspicion of reckless manslaughter of the two babies and medical harm to 15 others, and against

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE FAMILY



'IT'S ALL OVER': Inbar began life as a bright, inquisitive baby (top); her life today is 'one of hell,' says her father

"dozens" of other Heinz-Remedia executives as well as Health Ministry officials. All, the police allege, knew the soy formula lacked B1 and would have been well aware that it was a vital ingredient for babies, but let the product be marketed anyway. By law, the Health Ministry must approve any change in baby formulas. (The ministry has not responded to The Report's queries.)

Hillik Goldstein, a media adviser for both Heinz (USA) and Heinz-Remedia, insists that it was "unacceptable" that the police publicized the results of its investigation before the German inquiry was even finished, and without giving CEO Landsberger a chance to review the allegedly incriminating material collected against him. "A year has gone by and the police are obviously under enormous public pressure to name suspects in Israel," he says.

Goldstein says the defective product was made by Humana and "merely marketed" by Heinz-Remedia. "Humana assumed responsibility for the error," he adds. In an agreement reached four months ago, he says, "Humana's insurance company agreed to handle all compensation."

Yet both Heinz and Heinz-Remedia

