The Daily Telegraph (London)

**December** 18, 2015 Friday   
Edition 1;   
National Edition

Babies suffering from 'illogical' failure over **folic acid**  
  
**BYLINE:** Sarah Knapton  
  
**SECTION:** NEWS; Pg. 10  
  
**LENGTH:** 521 words

THE failure to put **folic acid** in flour is leaving 150 babies a year suffering from diseases such as **spina** **bifida** and causing more deformities than the thalidomide scandal, researchers have said. **Folic acid** is crucial to the healthy development of a baby in the womb. Although pregnant women have for decades been urged to take **folic acid** supplements, the rates of **neural tube** **defects** - of the brain, spine or spinal cord - have not fallen.

The Food Standards Agency, the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition and Dame Sally Davies, the chief medical officer, have all called for it to be added to bread but the Government has so far not taken any action.

Prof Joan Morris, who led the research team at the Wolfson Institute of Preventive Medicine at Queen Mary University of London, said the failure to fortify flour has had "significant consequences".

"It is a public health failure that Britain has not implemented the fortification of flour with **folic acid** for the prevention of **spina** **bifida**and other **neural tube** **defects**," she said.

"This failure has caused, and continues to cause, avoidable terminations of pregnancy, stillbirths, neonatal deaths and permanent serious disability in surviving children."

The researchers compared Britain with the United States, where bread has been supplemented with **folic acid** - the synthetic form of vitamin B9 - since 1998. Based on the success of the US scheme, scientists concluded that if a similar policy had been in place in the UK between 1998 and 2012, more than 2,000 babies - around 150 a year - would not have been aborted or born disabled.

The researchers said Britain should follow the lead of the US and 77 other countries to curb the associated toll of foetal and infant death and disability.

The team compared the situation to thalidomide, the drug given to pregnant women to ease morning sickness in the Fifties and Sixties, which resulted in the births of 500 people with growth abnormalities in the UK.

"Justifiably, steps were introduced to immediately halt the epidemic, and regulatory precautions were introduced to avoid another similar epidemic," they wrote in a paper for the journal Archive of Childhood Diseases.

"Unfortunately, no such sense of urgency has been applied to the prevention of **spina** **bifida**.

"It is illogical to take preventive public health action to avoid a druginduced congenital anomaly, but to largely ignore action in relation to a congenital anomaly which can be prevented by vitamin fortification of flour, when the failure to act has resulted in, and continues to result in, many more serious cases."

In 1991, the UK Medical Research Council Vitamin Study showed that a supplement of **folic acid** taken before and during early pregnancy cut the risk of **neural tube** **defects** by about 72 per cent.

In 1992, the Department of Health in England advised women to take **folic acid** supplements before pregnancy to reduce the risk of having a baby with a **neural tube** **defect**, but evidence shows fewer than one in three women did so.

2,000 The estimated number of babies aborted or born disabled between 1998 and 2012 attributed to a lack of **folic acid** in bread