

France vows probe into breast implant failures

January 3 2012, by Michael Mainville

France vowed on Tuesday to investigate failures to detect faults with the French-made breast implants at the centre of a global health scare, as a senior lawmaker urged a full parliamentary probe.

Meanwhile a supplier to the manufacturer at the heart of the scandal, Poly Implant Prothese (PIP), confirmed it had sold the firm the non-standard, industrial-grade silicone believed to have been used in the implants.

A growing litany of accusations against the now-defunct PIP has triggered a worldwide scare, with several countries including France now advising thousands of women to have the implants surgically removed.

Between 300,000 and 400,000 women in 65 countries are believed to have implants made with sub-standard gel which the firm, once the world's third-largest silicone implant producer, used to cut its costs.

"All the elements now suggest that the gel was truly contaminated," French Health Minister Xavier Bertrand told France 2 television, referring to the material used in PIP's implants.

"How was this not detected by checks?" he asked. "I have asked for investigations at the Directorate General of Health and (health safety agency) AFSSAPS to know what happened, how these checks were done."

Bertrand said that he would in the next few days contact his counterparts around Europe to discuss the scandal.

Chantal Jouanno, a senator with the ruling UMP party, said she had made a formal request for a parliamentary investigation to be held "without delay".

"The end of 2011 was marked by the revelations of the scandal around PIP breast implants... (which) established the risks of rupture and inflammation from these implants," she said in a statement.

"This is a problem of public safety which the nation's representatives must seize upon."

Bertrand said he supported the call for a parliamentary probe, which would be a "comprehensive look... at what happened."

Based in the south of France, PIP was shut down and its products banned in 2010 after it was revealed to have been using industrial-grade silicone gel that caused abnormally high rupture rates.

Fears over its implants spread globally last month after French health authorities advised 30,000 women to have their PIP implants removed because of the increased risk of rupture.

Officials have also said that cancer, including 16 cases of breast cancer, had been detected in 20 French women with the implants, but have insisted there is no proven link with the disease.

Prosecutors in Marseille, near PIP's laboratory at Seyne-sur-Mer on the Mediterranean, have received more than 2,500 complaints from French women who received the implants and are pursuing a criminal investigation.

The firm's 72-year-old founder, Jean-Claude Mas, has admitted to using non-standard silicone in the implants but denied any health risks.

A French supplier of PIP on Tuesday confirmed selling silicone to the firm that was meant only for industrial uses.

"All the specifications of the product that was ordered from us corresponded to industrial material," Pierre Gaches, the CEO of Toulouse-based Gaches Chimie, told AFP.

He said the company had supplied PIP with industrial-grade silicone since the early 2000s.

On Monday France's RTL radio revealed that a breakdown of the materials used in the implants showed that they also contained additives used in the oil and rubber industries.

Authorities in many countries have advised women to consult their doctors over the implants. Some nations, including Bolivia and Venezuela, have said that in some cases the implants would be removed for free.

The Czech Republic on Tuesday became the latest country to urge women with the implants to see their doctors, though the public health authority SUKL said it had not yet recorded any implant-related illnesses.

France is paying to have the implants removed among French women, at an estimated cost of up to 60 million euros (\$78 million), and has said it will pursue PIP in the courts for damages.

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