

French police arrest boss of breast implant company

January 26 2012, by Anne Beade

French police on Thursday arrested Jean-Claude Mas, the founder of the PIP breast implant company that sparked a global health scare by using substandard silicone, as part of a manslaughter probe.

More than 400,000 women around the world are believed to have received implants made by Poly Implant Prothese (PIP), which was shut down in 2010 after it was revealed to have been using industrial-grade silicone gel that caused abnormally high rupture rates.

"Jean-Claude Mas was arrested at 7:00 am and taken into custody" on the orders of an investigating judge, Marseille prosecutor Jacques Dalles told AFP.

He said the arrest was made in connection with a manslaughter investigation opened by prosecutors in the southern port city of Marseille in December and that Mas could be held in custody for up to 48 hours.

Prosecutors said police had also arrested Claude Couty, another former executive at the now-defunct PIP, in southern France.

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

Between 400,000 and 500,000 women in 65 countries are believed to have received implants from PIP, once the world's third-largest silicone

implant producer.

A number of countries, including Germany and the Czech Republic, have followed France in recommending that the devices be removed as a precaution but Britain has said it will not follow suit.

Thirteen countries in Europe and Latin America have also urged women to have a checkup.

French officials have 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.

Mas was arrested at the home of his partner in the south of France. Dallest said police carried out a search of the residence, in the town of Six-Fours-les-Plages, for evidence in the case.

Mas was taken from the home around 1200 GMT in an unmarked grey van, led by a police car with its lights flashing. A half-hour later the vehicles were seen arriving at the national police station in Marseille.

Mas's lawyer, Yves Haddad, said of his 72-year-old client: "He is not well, he is tired and he is waiting for his doctor."

In interviews, Mas has confirmed the implants were made with a non-authorised silicon gel but rejected any suggestion that they pose a health risk.

"I knew that the gel wasn't approved, but I did it knowingly, because the PIP gel was cheaper... and of much better quality," Mas said, according to minutes of a police interview conducted in October seen by AFP.

Philippe Courtois, a lawyer representing women who received the PIP

implants, said he was encouraged by Mas's arrest but did not expect his story to change.

"Considering the outrageous statements he has made in regards to all the victims, we do not expect very much from this hearing," Courtois said.

Representatives of two groups advocating for women who received the implants were to appear before the investigating judge on Thursday and Friday.

Along with the manslaughter investigation, prosecutors in Marseille have already concluded an aggravated fraud case in the implant scandal that is expected to be brought to court by the end of the year.

Marseille prosecutors have received more than 2,500 complaints in the case, which has sparked calls for wider European regulation and monitoring of medical devices such as breast implants.

Mas, a former travelling salesman who got his start in the medical business by selling pharmaceuticals, founded PIP in 1991 to take advantage of the booming market for cosmetic implants.

He reportedly told investigators that he used fake business data to fool health inspectors.

The substandard gel was in 75 percent of PIP breast implants, saving the company about one million euros (\$1.3 million) annually, according to an ex-company executive.

Jean-Claude Mas, the fallen king of implants

An audacious inventor for some, a crook to scores of women, Jean-Claude Mas for 30 years enjoyed fame and fortune in the breast implant

industry until his substandard gel doomed his company.

"He always wanted to be first," says lawyer Yves Haddad of his now 72-year-old client's ambition that went awry.

The founder of Poly Implant Prothese (PIP) saw his company shut down amid a scandal over using unauthorised silicone gel and on Thursday he was arrested at the home of his companion in southern France as part of a manslaughter probe by Marseille prosecutors.

Born in Tarbes in southwest France in 1939, Mas, armed with a secondary school diploma in mathematics, dabbled in a dozen different careers after his military service in Algeria. From working in a grocery store he became a salesman, first peddling insurance and then wine and cognac, according to his interviews with investigators.

In 1965 he started selling medication to doctors and spent 10 years with the US pharmaceutical giant Bristol-Myers.

A turning point came in 1982 when he met his future companion Dominique Lucciardi-- with whom he had two children-- who was manager of a breast implant company working with a Toulouse plastic surgeon, Henri Arion, who in 1965 had invented an inflatable prosthesis using saline solution.

Mas began working for Arion and remained with his company for nine years. As he told French authorities later it was the formula of his mentor that he used to create his "in-house" gel for breast implants which have become an international health scare.

The bearded Mas went off to found PIP and take advantage of the booming industry in 1991.

Two years later, well before the scandal broke, Mas had allegedly already given his order to hide the truth about his production during inspections by a German company involved in quality control and certifying implants for the market.

During the 1990s PIP filled its breast implants with a substandard gel, and in 2000, US authorities sounded the alarm after their inspection of the PIP premises.

But nothing came of it. When silicone was reauthorised in France in 2001, Mas allegedly opted for fraud to boost profits, using his own cheaper gel even though he told regulators it was an approved American brand.

The Mas-made gel was in 75 percent of PIP breast implants, saving the company about one million euros (\$1.3 million) annually, according to an ex-company executive.

The Mas way of handling things when the inspectors came was allegedly to show them fake business data that he kept on a USB key. "The routine," as he put it to investigators.

In the booming market for breast implants, Mas became inventive, producing in 2001 a product that offered "exceptional aesthetic results," as the French financial newspaper Les Echos put it.

PIP started getting a reputation as an innovative company. It also produced on request other prostheses, such as for the calf or nose, and even contemplated producing testicular implants, according to an ex-employee.

But things took a turn for the worse around 2005 when its breast implants full of industrial-grade silicone began having abnormally high

rupture rates. In 2010 PIP was shut down and its products banned.

Then late last year French health officials advised 30,000 women to have their PIP implants removed, triggering a global health scare as up to 500,000 women around the world are believed to have received PIP implants.

While Mas has admitted using an unauthorised gel, he denies his product poses a health risk. Cancer has been found in 20 French women with PIP implants, but health authorities say there is no proven link to the disease.

The elderly Mas, caught in the storm of a worldwide scandal, remained out of public view, holed up in his luxury villa on the Riviera, until the police came knocking.

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