

# French firm blamed for Italy frozen embryo accident

April 2 2012

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An Italian hospital director on Monday blamed French industrial gas giant Air Liquide for an accident in an assisted reproduction lab last week that destroyed 94 embryos frozen in liquid nitrogen.

Air Liquide declined to comment on the accusation, after saying earlier that it had opened an internal investigation into what happened and would pay out compensation to would-be parents if the accident was indeed its fault.

Prosecutors on Monday also opened an inquiry, although officials said they had not yet determined whether or not the embryos should be considered living beings, which could lead to a possible investigation for manslaughter.

"It's Air Liquide's responsibility. The least they could do is explain what happened," Domenico Alessio, director of the San Filippo Neri hospital in Rome, told *Il Messaggero* daily, saying the incident was "unimaginable".

In another interview with *La Stampa* daily he also admitted, however, that an alarm went off in the hospital when the temperature began to rise but "no-one heard it" because it was in a basement while the lab was on the second floor.

Alessio told *Il Messaggero* he was "angry" that he had not yet received a report from Air Liquide on what happened after the incident on March

27.

"This is unacceptable. We are talking about a contract granted to the most important company for this type of service," he said.

In a statement on Sunday, Air Liquide said it followed strict procedures.

"We are profoundly sorry for this event, which contrasts with the security and quality standards that the company pursues and guarantees its clients," Andrea Saitta, director of Air Liquide Sanita Service, was quoted as saying.

"The company undertakes to pay out due compensation if its responsibility is confirmed," he said. The statement added that the lab system in place included an alarm to warn technicians if the liquid nitrogen was running out.

Air Liquide Sanita Service works with 600 hospitals across Italy.

Ninety-four embryos, 130 ovocyte egg cells and five sperm samples were lost after the temperature in which they were being kept frozen rose from minus 196 degrees Celsius (minus 321 Fahrenheit) to plus 20 degrees Celsius.

"It's clear that the nitrogen that should have kept the temperature stable was no longer there but it's the prosecutors who have to work out why this happened, why there were no alarms to avert the worst," Alessio said.

Officials said that the accident affected around 40 would-be parents, although they said all the women involved still had a chance of conceiving. Some of the couples have already said that they plan to sue over the accident.

The consumer rights group Codacons said it estimated that parents could obtain a total of one million euros (\$1.4 million) in compensation.

It also emerged on Monday that a couple in Milan were suing a lab over a power cut that led to the loss of their three embryos in May 2007.

The lawyers for the couple in the Milan case, Susanna Zimmaro and Anna Barbaccia, said the incident at San Filippo Neri "is certainly not the first case in Italy and unfortunately is not such a rare event."

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Citation: French firm blamed for Italy frozen embryo accident (2012, April 2) retrieved 10 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-04-french-firm-blamed-italy-frozen.html>

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