

Ex-Head Of Breast Implant Maker Arrested

Jamey Keaten, Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — The former head of a French company at the center of a breast implant scandal affecting tens of thousands of women worldwide was arrested along with his former deputy Thursday in southeast France, officials said.

Jean-Claude Mas, who founded and ran the now-defunct implant maker Poly Implant Prothese, was detained as part of a judicial investigation in the southeastern city of Marseille into manslaughter and involuntary injuries, an official said. A regional official said the company's former No. 2 executive, Claude Couty, was also detained.

The arrest before dawn at a family residence in the Mediterranean resort town of Six Fours Les Plages culminates weeks of speculation about whether judicial investigators would be able to assemble enough evidence to detain Mas on legal grounds.

Mas, 72, had been believed to be residing in the home. His defense lawyer Yves Haddad earlier this month denounced the "numerous un-truths, nonsense and aberrations" in the case, but said Mas would only speak with authorities.

So far no specific defendant has been named, but an official with knowledge of the probe said Mas was expected to face preliminary charges after appear before an investigating judge in Marseille later Thursday. He was being held in resort town ahead of that anticipated transfer.

The three officials all spoke on condition of anonymity because the case is in the hands of judicial investigators.

Investigating judge Annaick Le Goff opened the probe after a woman in the southwestern Gers region filed a lawsuit in the wake of the 2010 death from cancer of her daughter who had received a suspect implant.

Since then, a complaint by the sister of Marseille resident Edwige Ligoneches, a breast implant recipient who died in November of complications from lymphoma, has since been included in the case file — along with as many as 3,000 other complaints by other alleged victims.

Le Goff also spoke with the head of a victims' association, Muriel Ajello, on Thursday, the regional official said.

A secretary at the Toulon office of Haddad told The Associated Press that the defense lawyer was with Mas during police questioning, and was not immediately available for comment.

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The suspect PIP implants have been removed from the marketplace in several countries in and beyond Europe amid fears that they could rupture and leak silicone into the body.

Mas had run PIP until the company was closed in March 2010.

Mas is also on Interpol's most-wanted list, but the international police agency said its "red notice" was issued in June at the request of Costa Rica, where he faces a drunken driving charge.

Authorities worldwide have been scrambling to strike a proper public response to the scandal, notably concerning who will pay to remove the implants made with cheap, industrial-grade silicone instead of medical-grade gel — or if the implants need to invariably come out.

European governments have taken different positions: German, Czech and French authorities say they should be removed, while Britain says there is not enough evidence of health risks to suggest removal in all cases.

On Wednesday, health authorities in Brazil said the government will fine private health plans that refuse to pay for the removal and replacement of faulty breast implants sold by PIP and a Dutch company.

The scandal has put pressure on French health authorities for allegedly not doing enough to vet the quality of a product used by untold thousands of women both in France and abroad.

France's Health Safety Agency has said the suspect implants — just one type of implants made by PIP — appear to be more rupture-prone than other types. Investigators say PIP sought to save money by using industrial silicone, whose potential health risks are not yet clear.

PIP's website said the company had exported to more than 60 countries and was one of the world's leading implant makers. The silicone-gel implants in question are not sold in the United States.

According to estimates by national authorities, over 42,000 women in Britain received the implants, more than 30,000 in France, 9,000 in Australia and 4,000 in Italy. Nearly 25,000 of the implants were sold in Brazil.

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