

France: Drugmaker On Trial, Suspected In Deaths

The Associated Press

NANTERRE, France (AP) — The makers of a diabetes and weight loss drug suspected in the deaths of hundreds of people went on trial Tuesday, facing charges they misled the public about the product's safety.

But after years of delays in one of France's biggest recent health scandals, the proceedings could still be pushed back further.

Between 1976 and 2009, around 5 million people took Mediator, which was used to treat weight problems among diabetics and also marketed more widely. The European Medicines Agency pulled Mediator from shelves when it found that its active ingredient, benfluorex, could lead to a dangerous thickening of heart valves.

French health officials have said the drug may be linked 500 deaths; other studies have put the figure several times higher. Others who took the drug have suffered health problems.

Servier Laboratories, which sold Mediator, and its founder Jacques Servier face charges of "aggravated deception" in a trial that opened in Nanterre, outside Paris.

The 91-year-old Servier was present as proceedings began, slouching in his chair with his arms crossed.

Solange Roine, who once took Mediator, said she was glad that Servier was there to answer the charges.

"I hope he will confess at least," she said as she entered the court room. She wanted him to address "all the victims, because I am not the only one and some are not here anymore to talk about it."

But Servier left after two hours, after his lawyer asked for permission from the court, without saying much beyond confirming his name.

The day was filled with arguments over whether the trial should go forward or wait for the results of a separate investigation being carried out by a Paris judge.

Lawyers for Servier and the company argued that it was unfair that their clients face two trials on the same facts.

In addition to fraud charges, the investigation in Paris is also looking into manslaughter charges, and some victims would prefer to wait for those more thorough — and serious — proceedings to play out.

But other victims contend that Servier and his company are just using delaying

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tactics. Their lawyers argued Tuesday that the Nanterre trial was completely separate from the Paris investigation because it concerned their cases. The Paris investigation, they contend, is broader.

A trial could also help some victims move forward their claims for financial compensation.

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