

A Silent Epidemic by S. Joyce Attis - 2006

(This was written just months prior to Health Canada lifting the 14- year ban on silicone gel breast implants.)

We presently have a silent epidemic on our hands in Canada. If Health Canada accepts the applications from the two applicants attempting to bring silicone gel breast implants back on the Canadian market, I am very concerned that we will have a pandemic situation.

After all, if Health Canada deems a product safe for the constituents of Canada, the people must assume the product is safe. Our government wouldn't mislead us, would they?

I contend they would, they have and I am concerned they will continue to mislead and harm Canadian women. It is the lives of the women that are directly affected but all the lives of all family members are also impacted.

Our society has made it very uncomfortable for the vast majority of these women to step forward and to be open about the changes they have made to their bodies. 99% of them do not have breasts the size of Pamela Anderson. You wouldn't know if your neighbour, cousin, colleague or maybe even your friend had this procedure done. Most women opt to increase their breasts only one or two sizes; hardly noticeable to many but most certainly noticeable to themselves. Some say it raises their self-esteem but studies done by manufacturers dispute this. These women may be happier with their body parts but they are not any happier with their lives.

I have told many women, "We are not the two appendages that hang from our chests." As crude as that may sound; it is the truth. Let's learn to be happy with who we are from the inside out instead of the outside in. Isn't this the message of self-esteem we try to teach younger children? Shouldn't we be happy, healthy individuals who need to value the essence of who we are; not the essence of what body parts we can purchase at all costs, be they financial or health.

Women who have had implants are not visible in our society. What are visible are the plastic surgeons and their proxies, the manufacturers of these implants. With mega marketing ploys and dollars to back glitzy advertisements through the various media, young girls, young women and all people involved in their lives, would have no idea how dangerous these implants can be to their state of health if it were not for truthful women who will speak honestly, openly and often.

It is more than 40 years since silicone gel breast implants were introduced on the market and yet only two studies were done on women with leaking or ruptured silicone gel breast implants. No research has been done to find why some

women get ill and others don't. No research has been done on the supposed 'new' implants for durations longer than three years.

Why is this so? Are the manufacturers concerned with the results that will be found? Do they already know that too many implants will rupture and that the chemicals will leach into the bodies of the implant recipients? Could it be that the almighty dollar is more important than the health and safety of Canadian women?

The telephone rings again. This time it is a 26 year-old woman very confused and frightened. In a very rushed few sentences she tells me why she has called Breast Implant Line of Canada.

"My doctor told me this afternoon that my left breast implant has ruptured. He said I don't need to do anything about it. He says I'll be okay. Is this true?"

I am greatly saddened when I must tell a young woman that her physician has not given her the proper information. It makes me extremely unhappy to realize that many general practitioners and family physicians are not aware of proper procedures surrounding silicone gel or saline breast implants. Even sadder still, is the fact that some plastic surgeons are not fully aware of how to properly remove a ruptured silicone gel breast implant.

Breast Implant Line of Canada, a totally volunteered-based organization, was founded by four women in 1992 when it became apparent that breast implants were causing harm to women's bodies. There was no person or organization willing to discuss openly with breast implant recipients about their associated problems. Nor was there an unbiased person that could address these issues. Only plastic surgeons who make a living in full, or in part, from these devices seemingly had the answers. We four women knew we were living proof of breast implants causing harm to our bodies. The only common elements we shared are that we are women and all had silicone gel breast implants. Since our inception, we have taken more than 18,000 telephone calls.

Where were those women when, on September 29, 2005, Health Canada held its first-ever Public Forum on pre-market products? The general public was invited to address an Expert Advisory Panel. This Panel was appointed by Health Canada to recommend if the applications made by two companies, to bring silicone gel breast implants back to the Canadian market, should be accepted.

It may have been quite daunting for the novice public speaker to contemplate addressing that panel of people but we were hopeful that women would come forward. The directions on-line were overwhelming for some because the areas to be specifically addressed were stated. It had been decided, one can assume, when this panel (then of a much smaller number) met in secret in March 2005, with the two applicants, the decision was made about what they wanted to hear and what they did not want to hear at the Forum.

We breast implant recipients became even more invisible as the bureaucrats and industry dictated what we could even mention at the Forum. Just how much more conflicted could this become? Believe me, it became much more conflicted.

Three of the Panel Members were paid by the companies at least once in the past for a variety of tasks from presenting about their products to speaking on behalf of the products at the FDA Hearing in the US just one month later.

Even more in a state of conflict is that those same three and the Chair signed affidavits just one week prior to the Health Canada Forum stating that Dow Corning silicone breast implants do not cause health complications as stated by some breast implant recipients.

This is an unbiased group who should make a decision about silicone gel breast implants returning to the Canadian Market? They may be visible but they are in gross conflict of interest.

We were fortunate to have women from various advocacy groups, a former husband of an implanted woman, Canadian Members of Parliament, a man who has studied these products since the 1980's, a research scientist who, when doing an autopsy, found silicone in all the body organs of a woman who was a breast implant recipient, and three women who were greatly harmed by these medical devices.

Six women who stated how wonderful their new implants are; none of these women had been implanted longer than three years ago. It is well documented most implant recipients do not have health complications until about year five. And all but one of these women boldly stated their way to Ottawa, hotel, and meals were covered by one of the manufacturers. "Oh, but I would have gone on my own, anyway", each said. The invisible paid to become visible.

Where were the women who call me? For weeks, I made many phone calls to get women to Ottawa to address this Forum. But only three of us were willing to speak openly about our health complications as they related to the silicone breast implants. Most women who call me with their health problems are unfortunately embarrassed to speak publicly. I was given every excuse possible. Most women are too frightened to become visible.

Society dictated for many years that a healthy woman who developed small breasts was indeed a healthy woman. Once silicone gel breast implants were introduced, women with small breasts were suddenly in need of 'repair'. Plastic Surgeons could offer them breast implants as enhancements to make their breasts normal. Normal. Normal? What is normal?

Let's speak openly about this. I challenge each and every breast implant recipient to call Breast Implant Line of Canada at 416-636-6618 to tell us how you would like to help 'Spread the Word' of how dangerous these faulty medical devices can be. Let's work together to ensure we don't have a pandemic of silence for the next generation of Canadian Women. Let's make ourselves visible.

Oh yes, back to Susan. I tell her I hope she will be okay and I quiz her about her general health and then more specifically about the implants. I tell her she and any other person with a ruptured silicone gel breast implant should be concerned. Don't waste your energy in worrying I tell her. It's time to take action. That implant must be removed en bloc. This means all of the capsule (scar tissue) that surrounds the implant and the implant, too, should be removed in one piece if at all possible. This will prevent additional leakage of the silicone gel and/or chemicals into her body.

If you see a plastic surgeon who says it is not necessary to remove the capsule (scar tissue), please move on to another plastic surgeon.

If you meet a plastic surgeon who will admit that the silicone gel breast implants did cause and will continue to cause harm, please call me with her or his name. We have lots of work for that doctor. Together we can end this reign of 'invisibility'.

S. Joyce Attis is co-founder, president and spokesperson for Breast Implant Line of Canada. This is a totally volunteer-based non-profit organization. Through telephone networking, she helps to educate women thinking of getting breast implants by educating them with facts and sharing the stories of many other women who had breast implants. Joyce also shares her own story of the one silicone gel breast implant she had placed in her body in 1972 at the age of 21; her right breast never developed due to Poland's Syndrome; how her body was harmed, and her life not just negatively impacted but harmed during the twenty years that silicone gel breast implant was in her body.