

Old fears dog new breast implants
'Licence to wound'

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Women who say their silicone breast implants caused everything from skin rashes to terminal lung disease and deformity pleaded with a Health Canada expert panel yesterday not to lift a 13-year near ban on the controversial devices.

But defenders praised today's newer implants for giving breasts a softer, "more pleasing" shape and argued the mass hysteria that followed the removal of silicone implants from the market in 1992 should not tarnish the safety of today's devices.

Implant manufacturers told the panel women are exposed to more small silicone molecules from lipstick, roll-on antiperspirant and shampoo than what would come from a ruptured silicone breast implant.

But patients and groups opposed to making the implants available without restrictions said manufacturers have failed to provide credible long-term data that the devices are safe.

"When defenders of silicone implants claim that 'no conclusive evidence' links implants with the physical symptoms reported by women, think cigarettes and Vioxx," Shari Graydon, author of *In Your Face: The Culture of Beauty and You*, told the panel. Ms. Graydon followed a stream of plastic surgeons, nurses and patients who praised the implants for being superior to saline for deflated, sagging breasts.

"If you insist on more research, not a single woman will become seriously ill or incapacitated from wanting, but not getting, silicone breast implants," Ms. Graydon said. She urged the panel not to buy into the "increased choice mantra." She said large breasts "go in and out of vogue" and that U.S. surgeons "credit Pamela Anderson" for implants' current popularity.

Jane Ann Wyatt, at times her voice barely audible, told the panel her silicone implants smelled "like swamp water" when they were removed. The Peterborough, Ont., woman had silicone implant augmentation in 1976. She was told there was no downside to surgery.

She had to stop working in 1992, her health deteriorating. She was diagnosed with connective tissue disease. For the past seven years she has lived in supportive housing in a seniors' residence. She told the panel that at times, she can't formulate a sentence or walk six metres to her bathroom without assistance. She suffers from "random, non-epileptic seizures." She is on a morphine patch "24/7" and takes 16 prescription pills a day.

"I'm adamant these implants be denied until proven safe. Please think seriously about the future health of all women."

Lorna Stephen, of Toronto, had two sets of silicone implants over 19 years after surgeons recommended her own breasts be removed because of a precancerous condition.

Ms. Stephen, now 80, received thick gel-type implants, she told the panel. A hard capsule of scar tissue formed around the implant, causing contraction and painful distortion that "was so obvious it made my choice of clothes a problem." She had to have surgery to flatten the capsule.

She suffered years of pain, arthritis, skin rashes and chronic fatigue.

"We women whose implants failed are real people still paying a heavy price for past experiments on us," Ms. Stephen said.

Both Inamed and Mentor Corporations said today's third-generation implants are made of thicker, more Gummi Bear-like gels that makes them far more likely to hold their shape should they rupture.

But a former Health Canada scientist who was among the first to raise safety suspicions about older silicone implants said today's devices are no better made than the implants that were voluntarily pulled from the market in 1992. Pierre Blais told the panel re-approving silicone implants would amount to a "licence to wound."

Mentor said its implants are durable and long-lasting, with a rupture rate of 1%, and that most of those result from stress during surgery, for example, the surgeon poking the implant with a sharp instrument or pushing it through too small an opening.

Both companies argued no credible scientific group has concluded that silicone breast implants pose an increased risk of breast cancer or connective tissue diseases, such as lupus.

"The time has come for Health Canada to approve silicone gel-filled implants for general use in the Canadian market," said Dr. Michael Drever, past president of the Canadian Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery.

Speaking on behalf of Inamed, which paid for his travel costs, Dr. Drever said he was not there "to make a sales pitch" for silicone implants.

But he said the gel "sticks together, it won't spill if you turn it upside down and if you touch it with your finger, the silicone that adheres to it springs back into the implant as soon as your finger is removed."

Plastic surgeon Christine Tang said silicone implants are "by far the superior choice" for breast reconstruction after surgery for breast cancer because there is often very little tissue to cover an implant.