

OBITUARIES

Jacques Servier

Founder of French pharmaceutical company Laboratoires Servier

Ned Stafford *Hamburg*

Jacques Servier (b 1922; q Paris University 1947), died 16 April 2014.



On 31 December 2008 Jacques Servier received France's highest distinction, the Legion of Honour's grand cross. Nicolas Sarkozy, president at the time, described Servier as "an entrepreneur the likes of which few are to be found in France." In the 1950s Servier, a publicity shy billionaire, founded a pharmaceutical company that grew to become the second largest in France and among the top 30 in the world.

Less than a year after receiving the honour, Servier and his company, Laboratoires Servier, would become embroiled in one of France's biggest medical scandals. The consequences would hang over Servier until his death, which was announced in a short statement by his company.

"The Servier Research Group and all its collaborators have learnt with great sadness [of] the death of their president-founder, Dr Jacques Servier, who died at home today in his ninety-third year," the statement said. ¹ "The spirit, the motivation and the mission of this exceptional personality, whose whole life revolved around the research of innovative medicines, will continue to exist in the priorities given to scientific research and human values in the enterprise he created exactly 60 years ago."

Servier's troubles began in 2009, when his company pulled benfluorex, one of its top selling drugs, from the French market. Sold in France under the trade name Mediator, the drug was developed as a treatment for overweight patients with diabetes.

The drug makes cells more sensitive to insulin and increases production of glycogen, reducing appetite. Benfluorex was widely prescribed off label to people without diabetes who wanted to lose weight.

Evidence that benfluorex had potentially dangerous side effects—notably cardiac valve damage and pulmonary hypertension—had been accumulating for years.² Introduced to the French market in 1976, the drug had been prescribed to an estimated 5 million people, with 300 000 prescriptions still active in 2009. Health officials estimated that at least 500 people died from benfluorex side effects, although some estimates are as high as 2000. Thousands are thought to have experienced complications linked to the drug.

In December 2009, after benfluorex was withdrawn in France, the European Medicines Agency recommended "the withdrawal of all medicines containing benfluorex in the European Union, because their risks, particularly the risk of heart valve disease, are greater than their benefits."^{3 4} Dozens of patients claiming benfluorex side effects filed law suits, and in January 2011 Servier was subpoenaed by lawyers on behalf of six patients who experienced serious cardiovascular side effects.

In the same month, the French social affairs inspectorate issued a report based on its investigation.⁵ The report stated that the Servier group had misled health authorities and concealed the true pharmacological nature of the drug and that, although the Servier group had developed the drug as an appetite suppressant, the company's "doctrine" was to market it as an antidiabetes drug.

The report noted that Afssaps, the French medicines agency, had missed several opportunities to withdraw benfluorex from the market. In 1997 the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) withdrew diet drugs fenfluramine and dexfenfluramine from the US market.⁶ Other nations around the world followed the FDA's lead, and Wyeth set aside more than \$21bn to resolve personal injury claims. But benfluorex, a derivative of fenfluramine, which also was developed by the Servier group, continued to be sold in France until 2009.

In 2012 Servier and six companies in the Servier group were charged with manslaughter and injury. In 2013 Servier appeared in court for trial in Nanterre, but the trial was postponed until the completion of a separate investigation.

Details of Servier's personal life are sketchy. His net worth is estimated at \$7.6bn, and he was ranked by *Forbes Magazine* as the 173rd wealthiest person in the world. Servier was born in 1922 in Vatan, France. The *New York Times* described his father as a pharmacist and his mother a school teacher.⁷ According to the website of Collège International de Recherche Servier—a foundation founded by Servier—he received his medical degree in 1947 and pharmacy diploma in 1950, both from Paris University.⁸ These were followed in 1957 by a doctorate in pharmacy from Lille University.

Contacted by *The BMJ*, the Servier company press office said that Servier practised medicine “for a short period before founding the laboratory.” The laboratory was a small pharmaceutical production firm in Orléans that Servier bought in 1954. The next year the company launched its first two products—an antihypertensive drug and an antidiabetes drug.

The Servier group now has 21 000 employees in 140 countries. In 2013 its revenue totalled €4.2bn. The company reinvests 27% of its annual turnover into research and development, well above the pharmaceutical average in France of around 14%. Servier's main research areas are cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, the neurosciences, cancer, and osteoporosis-osteoarthritis.

In one of his rare public interviews, Servier said in 2009: “It's important to be a useful industry that contributes to human development. We prefer to make money and be a constructive industry rather than a phoney one. In the words of Dostoyevsky, ‘Money is an essential tool.’ This is why we spend a lot on R&D and pay our staff generously.”

As the company grew Servier closely guarded its independence, opting not to go public. Eventually he changed the ownership

structure to that of a foundation—making takeover bids virtually impossible—and retained control until his death.

In the wake of Servier's 2009 withdrawal of benfluorex, France and the European Union enacted new pharmacovigilance legislation.^{9 10} The Afssaps medicines agency was disbanded and reorganised as the National Agency for the Safety of Medicines and Health Products (MSNA).

According to the *New York Times*, Servier leaves his second wife and three daughters.

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