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Death highlights risk of illegal injections

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BY C.G. WALLACE
ASSOCIATED PRESS

ALBANY, Ga. -- Nikkia Scott and other drag queens have been getting illegal, back-room injections of industrial-grade silicone to give themselves some of the things nature denied them when they were born male - breasts, wider hips, more prominent cheekbones. They know the risks are extreme, yet still they do it.

"Anything you put in your body that don't belong there will hurt you in the long run," Scott said of her \$6,000 worth of injections. "But believe me, it has been worth it. It has been worth it."

The dangers were illustrated recently by the death of 23-year-old Andre D. Jeter, who authorities say suffered convulsions and fell unconscious Dec. 10 after receiving injections in her hips and buttocks during a "pumping party" in Albany. She died a month later.

One of Scott's roommates, Stephen Oneal Thomas, 31, was charged last month with murder and other offenses for allegedly administering the injections. Thomas' lawyer refused comment on Tuesday.

Scott and three others were also arrested in the case and charged with conspiracy and practicing medicine without a license. They were accused, among other things, of helping Thomas by recruiting patients at drag-queen beauty pageants.

The victim was a man living as a woman, as are all four defendants.

'PUMPING'

The death has thrown a spotlight on "pumping," a thriving underground practice among men living as women, particularly those who compete in beauty pageants and perform in drag shows.

Pumping parties are typically held in motel rooms or apartments.

While medical-grade silicone is implanted under the skin in sealed sacs to keep it from leaking, pumping involves injecting silicone straight into the body.

And the silicone used is the stuff sold in hardware stores as a sealant. It is not sterile and can cause infections, particularly in the lungs.

The silicone is often mixed with paraffin, oil, even peanut butter, said Dallas Denny of the transgender support group Gender Education & Advocacy. In Jeter's case, it was probably mixed with baby oil, based on how it smelled to others who received the injections, said James Paulk, an investigator for the district attorney.

There was so much silicone in Jeter's body that when incisions were made during the autopsy, a clear, brownish liquid flowed out, Paulk said.

The scope of the phenomenon is unclear. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Food and Drug Administration and transgender groups said they do not keep track of the problem. But Paulk said a "slew" of people have been injured, including three or four in Montgomery, Ala., six or seven in Columbus, Ga., and a few in Jacksonville, Fla.

A TIGHT-KNIT SOCIETY

"The transgender society is a very tight-knit society. They don't like to give each other up because if you do, you get barred from the pageants," Paulk said. "If they're not hurting and they're not experiencing medical problems, they aren't calling me."

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A day after his arrest, a stubble-faced Scott, wearing large hoop earrings, was back to gluing weaves to heads at a beauty parlor in Albany, a town 150 miles south of Atlanta. His roommate Jazz, also arrested in the case, was at home, wearing pajamas and pink flowered flip-flops.

Jazz and Scott compete in drag shows during "black society" nights at a bar called Queens in Albany. They dress in gowns and rhinestones and perform songs for tips.

They both strongly denied any involvement in giving silicone injections and said they did not know their roommate Thomas was "pumping."

Scott, identified as Freddie Clyde in court documents, said her silicone injections have not caused any serious health problems.

But Jazz, whose legal name is Mark Edwards, said she has had three procedures - face, bust and lower body - that cost her about \$3,300, and has suffered severe side effects.

CHEMICALS AND SCARS

Last year, she said, she started coughing heavily and discovered the silicone had gotten into her lungs, giving her chemical pneumonia. She spent two months in the hospital and several more months on bed rest, and her weight dropped from 270 to 150.

She also lifted up her T-shirt to show the scar under one of her breasts where doctors went in to remove a hardened clump of silicone.

'LIKE A MONSTER'

As for Jeter, Jazz said, she had taken the injections too far. Jeter had complained that her head itched and that her hair had stopped growing, according to Jazz. "Jeter was making herself look like a monster," Jazz said.

Despite her own health problems, Jazz said she has nothing against the woman who gave her the injections.

"I don't want to prosecute her, I want to thank her," she said.

"I'm the one who wanted the work. She did nothing wrong but what I wanted."

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