

local news

Four arrested for silicone injections in south Ga.

Death of trans woman in December leads to investigation

By CHRISTOPHER SEELY

Dougherty County officials arrested four transgendered women March 25 in connection with a string of cosmetic silicone injections, charging one of them with the death of a transgendered Albany resident.

Andre Jeter, 23, received silicone injections in her face and chest Dec. 10, and died a month later from major organ failure, according to Dougherty County District Attorney Ken Hodges.

"This is a very dangerous procedure and if anybody is engaging in having silicone injected straight into their body by anybody and certainly by anyone who is not a doctor — they shouldn't do it," Hodges said.

Stephen Oneal Thomas, 31, was charged with felony murder, involuntary manslaughter and unauthorized practice of medicine in relation to Jeter's death.

Authorities also charged Mark Edwards, 23, Freddie Clyde, 22, and Kontavious Parks, 23, with unauthorized practice of medicine and criminal conspiracy for attempting to mislead law enforcement officials during the investigation.



Transgender activist **Dallas Denny** said illicit silicone injections are popular among transgendered people, 'especially around the club girls' and pageant circuit. (Photo by Joan Sherwood)

All four people who were arrested in the case are transgendered women, according to Hodges. Only their legal names were released with other documents about the case.

Four other transgendered victims came forward after Jeter's death, alleging they too had received silicone shots from Thomas, beginning last September and ending in December.

For allegedly administering the shots, Thomas faces four counts of unauthorized practice of medicine.

"Every one of the people will suffer serious health risks and may end up dead," Hodges said.

All the injections allegedly took place in the south Georgia city of Albany, according to Hodges.

Edwards, Clyde and Parks allegedly identified potential clients, negotiated fees and transported clients to the injection site. Edwards allegedly assisted with the injection procedures, according to court documents.

The charges against the transgendered women did not detail the cost of the injections. But Dallas Denny, a transgendered activist who has spoken out about silicone injections for 15 years, said illicit silicone injections cost from \$300 to \$700, depending on the silicone quality.

The popularity of silicone injections is high in transgender circles "especially around the club girls" and pageant circuit, Denny said. Generally, injections are sought to enhance breasts, lips, buttocks and cheeks, to make a biological male look more feminine, she said.

"Some cheekbones are so exaggerated they don't look at all natural, so you know they have probably been pumped," Denny said.

It's typical for an injector to have a "publicity machine" sweeping into cities to draw people into "pumping parties" where the silicone injections usually take place, Denny said.

Once injected into the body, silicone can migrate to places where it's not intended, causing skin discoloration, scarring and medical problems in organs, according to Dr. Mark Koponen, deputy chief medical examiner at the Georgia Bureau of Investigation.

Often the silicone ends up in the blood stream and can block small blood vessels in the lungs, resulting in potentially lethal scarring of the lung tissue, he said.

Many victims of silicone injection are aware of the hazards but choose to receive the injections anyway, according to Denny.

"There is a lot of consensual denial," she said. "At some level I think people probably do know that it is not the best thing and some people really don't know."

Transgendered women who choose to seek out the injections despite the risks should make sure the needles are clean and the silicone is a high grade, according to Brenda Thomas, a transgendered woman who advises the city health department in Houston on issues including HIV.

People seeking injections should also find out as much as possible about the silicone being used before allowing it to enter their body, Thomas said.

Silicone is mixed with paraffin, oil or peanut butter, according to Denny.

"None of it is safe, but some practices are safer," Thomas said.

In Houston last year, two transgendered women died of silicone injections, Thomas said.

The injections are now becoming popular among gay men who want bigger pectoral mass, buttock enlargements, and to counter facial wasting caused by HIV medications, Thomas said.