

Le Parisien
March 13, 2019

Editor's note: This English translation was done by a third party. The original digital report can be accessed [here](#).

Propecia: This Mother Accuses the Hair-loss Treatment of Being Responsible for her Son's Suicide

In 2016, Romain ended his life after several years of hair-loss treatments. Since then, his mother, Sylviane Mathieu, has set up an association to help other victims of Propecia

By Zoé Lauwereys

An aesthetic complex, a treatment to remedy it, and sometimes dramatic consequences. This is the story of Romain Mathieu, a young man who for several years took Propecia, a drug meant to slow male pattern baldness, but one that can lead to serious side effects ranging from sexual dysfunction to depression, according to some patients. Romain Mathieu ended his life in 2016, but his case will soon be brought to justice, along with two others.

Today, Sylviane, the mother of Romain Mathieu, is the voice of her son. She tells Le Parisien about her fight to recognize the link between this treatment and the serious symptoms that her son and other alleged victims have suffered.

This story begins at the end of 2010, with a simple consultation with a dermatologist. Romain is 19 years old and has some acne problems. He takes advantage of this interview with the specialist to mention another concern: he is losing his hair.

“She told him about a revolutionary treatment,” recalls Sylviane Mathieu, who accompanied her son to the appointment. There are no side effects, the doctor assures her when she asks the question. The treatment is finasteride, a drug marketed by Merck under the name Propecia, and designed to block the action of testosterone, which in high concentrations can precipitate hair loss. Originally, the drug is intended for patients suffering from enlarged prostate, who were most often seniors.

Like 30,000 other patients to whom the drug has been prescribed, Romain begins treatment: a tablet of one milligram a day. A few months after starting, the prep-school student confides to this mother that he feels tired, suffers from muscle pain, has lost his libido and has problems with his memory. “The doctors wanted reassurance of his symptoms. They trusted this drug blindly. The product leaflet only mentioned transient side effects,” recalls Sylviane.

‘A very serious depression’

Romain's symptoms do not improve, some even grow worse. But he continues his treatment until 2012. At that time, the first undesirable and potentially dangerous effects of Propecia begin appearing in the media. This forces Merck to change the product label to note the possibility of erectile dysfunction in one percent of patients. “Romain then quit the drug at once.” But, as Merck acknowledges, these side effects may persist long after treatment has stopped. “For more than 13 years in some cases,” says Sylviane, an unintentional expert in finasteride.

For Romain, the situation improves for a while: “He had less pain, was less tired, he regained his taste for life.” Then came the crash. “His pain exploded, he developed varicose veins in his testicles and gynecomastia,” says Sylviane. “We consulted more medical professionals, he took other drugs, some to increase testosterone.” During a final hormonal assessment, his doctor was bewildered: “Roman had testosterone levels equivalent to those of an 80-year-old man.”

Above all, Romain grew “seriously depressed” and his memory problems become more dramatic. He who mastered several languages, however, no longer finds his words. When someone speaks to him, he asks them to repeat what they just said. Little by little, he retreats into himself. “He couldn’t think anymore, when he had an appointment with a friend, he was preparing two weeks in advance. In the end, he was gone,” recalls Sylviane.

Still, the once-brilliant student somehow succeeds in completing business school and gets a job as a financial analyst in London. His mother praises these accomplishments. But the young man will never go to work in England. On June 7, 2016, Romain ends his life. He is 25 years old.

‘Measure the potential risks and the few benefits’

The next day, Sylviane Mathieu starts her fight against finasteride. This 52-year-old woman has no doubt about the link between her son’s condition and the drug, a link that has been established by doctors, she says. She launches the AVFIN (Victims of Finasteride), collects testimonials from hundreds of people who have experienced adverse effects and encourages those who might be tempted by the “miracle pill” to “make an informed choice” before ingesting the product: “It’s a real endocrine disruptor. It’s necessary to measure the potential risks and the few benefits.”

In 2017, the European Medicines Agency extends the list of adverse effects of the Merck medication and the National Agency for the Safety of Medicines (ANSM) issues Propecia warnings as a “precautionary principle.”

In the coming days, the lawyer Charles Joseph-Oudin, known for fighting for the victims of the Mediator and Dépakine, plans to go further and initiate three civil-court proceedings, including the case of Romain, in court of Nanterre. A forensic expert will have to establish for each case, a link between the serious side effects and the drug. The first hearing should take place next June. At most, the victims want this medicine, which Sylviane compares to playing “Russian roulette,” taken off the market.

For its part, the MSD laboratory, a subsidiary of Merck, defends itself by saying that “the health authorities consider the benefit-risk ratio of Propecia to be favorable” and that “the information concerning the cases of sexual disorders and depression are described accurately in the SPC (summary of product characteristics).” The company also points out that a newsletter to health professionals was distributed in February “to remind them that cases of sexual dysfunction and psychiatric disorders have been reported.”