

Police search India drug factory linked to sterilization deaths

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A few hours later, after the police left, witnesses reported smoke rising from medicines burning behind the building.

Mahawar Pharmaceuticals, run from an upscale residential street in the eastern city of Raipur, is now at the center of a probe into more than a dozen deaths in eastern [India](#) after 83 women were sterilized at a government-run family planning camp.

More possible victims arrived at hospitals from villages in Bilaspur district, about 100 km (60 miles) from Raipur, on Thursday and Friday, some clutching medicine strips from Mahawar and complaining of vomiting, dizziness and swelling, a doctor at the district's main public hospital said.

At least one of the strips of antibiotics, seen by Reuters, was from the same batch as those handed out at the mass sterilization held on Saturday in the same district in Chhattisgarh state, one of India's poorest.

Police say they entered the Mahawar factory on Wednesday with the help of a security guard, but at first found nothing wrong. Drug inspectors returned the next day and shut it down, but not before two men were seen lighting a pre-dawn fire out back.

A Reuters reporter found a pile of ash surrounded by spilt white powder behind a wall at the single storey blue and white building. In the cinders were medicine packets, including for

Mahawar Pharma's Ciprocin 500 mg pills.

The state government has now banned the sale and distribution of all medicines from Mahawar, it said on Friday.

Speaking in police custody, Ramesh Mahawar, managing director of Mahawar Pharmaceuticals, told Reuters he and his son were innocent. He said the deaths and illness had only happened in Bilaspur, while his medicines have been sold elsewhere.

"The situation has been twisted in a wrong manner. We are just being harassed," said Mahawar, who has been making drugs for 35 years and said his company had an annual turnover of around \$130,000.

Nearly 28,000 tablets of Ciprocin manufactured by Mahawar were confiscated in Bilaspur on Friday, Siddhartha Pardeshi, the district's chief administrator, told Reuters.

But adding to the mystery, a preliminary post mortem report seen by Reuters for Shiv Kumari, one of the camp's victims, said she had died of septicemia, suggesting surgical infection.

## NEW PATIENTS

The new patients arriving in Bilaspur hospitals over the last two days did not take part in the sterilization camps and had consumed the drugs separately, the doctor and another official said.

"It looks like most of the sterilization patients might be affected due to this medicine," said the doctor, saying the strips showed the medicine was made in Raipur.

At least two patients have died due to faulty drugs, officials said, bringing the confirmed number of deaths to 15 and drawing investigators' attention away from the appalling sanitary conditions at the camp where Dr. R. K. Gupta conducted one tubectomy every 2 minutes in a two-hour sterilization drive.

Since then, women operated on by other doctors at different camps have also been hospitalized after consuming the same drugs. More than 100 remain in hospital, several in a critical condition.

One of five doctors who have conducted autopsies since Saturday's deaths said the post-mortems were inconclusive and recommended chemical analysis.

Another medicine on the state government's banned list was Ciprocin made by Regain Laboratories, halfway across the country in the state of Haryana. In Gujarat, another state, medicine quality control authorities have put Regain at the top of an offenders list for failing to meet standards.

Regain Laboratories director Mohit Bhatia did not answer repeated calls to his cell phone on Friday.

The deaths in Chhattisgarh have drawn unflattering attention to India's mass sterilization program, as well as weak quality control standards for drugs procured by state governments.

"States procure medicine through a tender and the manufacturers that bid the lowest quote win the order to supply, regardless of their manufacturing process or distribution systems," said

Bejon Kumar Misra, head of Partnership for Safe Medicines India, a non-governmental organization.

But G.N. Singh, the Drugs Controller General of India, said quality and safety came before price in the tender process.

"If the drugs are found to be substandard, we will suspend the license of the manufacturer," he said.

India is the world's top sterilizer of women, and efforts to rein in population growth have been described as the most draconian after [China](#). Indian birth rates fell in recent decades, but population growth is among the world's fastest.

Sterilization is popular because it is cheap and effective, and sidesteps cultural resistance to and problems with distribution of other types of contraception in rural areas.

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