

UNL professor testifies about safety of implants

By Sean Green
Senior Reporter

The current debate about silicone-gel breast implants has put one UNL professor in the national spotlight.

Michael Resch, an assistant professor of engineering mechanics at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, testified Feb. 19 on the safety of the implants before a Food and Drug Administration panel in Washington, D.C.

Resch said he got involved with the hearing because he thought the FDA should hear testimony from an engineer and not just medical experts. He was the only engineer who testified.

The FDA declared a moratorium on silicone-gel implants last month after several lawsuits were brought against Dow Corning Corporation, a major silicone manufacturer.

After three days of testimony, a panel appointed by the FDA unanimously voted to recommend the devices only be used for reconstructive surgery on cancer patients who have had mastectomies, Resch said.

The committee suggested women not get implants for cosmetic purposes — usually breast enlargement — until further research could be done on the devices. Resch said about 80 percent of the women who got implants did so for cosmetic reasons.

Resch's office is full of "evidence," mostly tupperware dishes with remains of breast implants that either have failed or have been removed for other reasons.

He has a supply of rubber gloves he wears when handling the implants and also has pictures he has taken of implant shells that have failed.

The photographs consist of a series of prints mounted on poster board and show the casings of breast implants that have ruptured.

Resch said he spent hours getting the light at the best angle to show the implants' cracks in the photographs.

He said he considered his work a chance to return a favor to taxpayers who paid for his post-graduate education.

"By helping the courts determine if the public is at risk, and who may have put them at risk, I think I am giving a little back to the taxpayers," he said.

Although some may consider being in the spotlight glamorous, Resch said, testifying has an unpleasant side.

The research must be done meticulously, and the testimony is grueling, he said.

"The big companies hire attorneys who attack your character, your credibility, your expertise and your opinions," he said. "They're like junkyard dogs."

In his testimony, Resch told the committee

that with any device, whether it was a tire, airplane wing or breast implant, engineers considered five basic design elements.

- Those elements include:
- Deciding how long the device should last.
 - Determining how much force the device is expected to undergo.
 - Considering the stresses caused by these forces on the device materials.
 - Performing comprehensive material testing to determine how the material will respond to this stress.
 - Determining if there is a reasonable expectation that the predictable life of the device is anything close to the actual life.

Students in the engineering mechanics department at UNL learn the five design elements their sophomore year, he said.

But, Dow Corning either didn't perform these tests or only did primitive versions of them, Resch said.

For example, he said, the company apparently tested what might happen to the implants if the person who had them was in a car accident.

However, he said, Dow Corning's tests were useless in determining the long-term life of the implants.

"It was generally expected by the patients and surgeons that these implants would last a lifetime," he said. "But the manufacturers had no data to support such a statement."

In other words, Resch said, designers failed to follow the correct engineering procedures when they manufactured the implants.

"Consequently, we know more about the design and life span of tires and airplane wings than we do about breast implants," he said.

Resch said he became interested in the product-liability litigation of breast implants in 1982 when an attorney came to Stanford University looking for help.

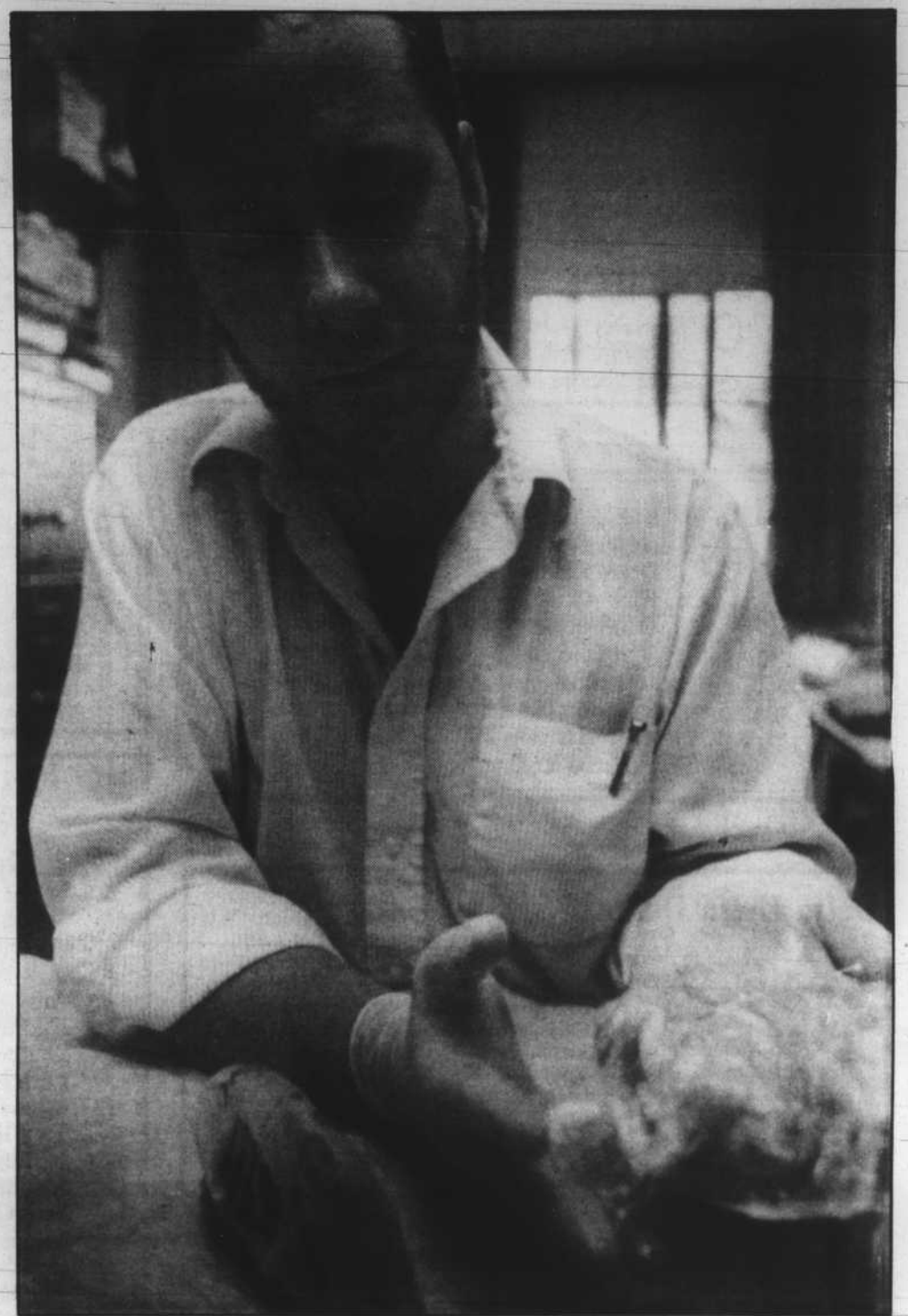
Resch was working on a dissertation at Stanford and at first was reluctant to become involved in a legal proceeding, he said.

"This attorney had been personally chosen by Robert Kennedy in the early '60s to handle some litigation," he said. "That impressed me because I had idolized R.F.K. when growing up."

Resch said the attorney believed people with expertise in areas such as science had a responsibility to use their knowledge to help courts find out who was at fault when the public was at risk.

The attorney was working on a lawsuit filed against a manufacturer of implants, he said, and wanted someone to look over the implant design.

"No one had gone over the record about the design defects of these implants," he said. "It was apparent to me after about 10 minutes what



Greg Bernhardt/DN

Michael Resch, a UNL assistant professor of engineering mechanics, holds silicone gelatin implants used in product litigation on the hazards of the implants.

was wrong with the design" — the saline creases around the implants had cracked.

After his first experience with product litigation involving breast implants, Resch said he continued to put his expertise to use in courts.

He spends one or two days a month testifying in or researching product-liability cases, he said. But he does not allow his research time to interfere with teaching.

Resch's latest testimony in last week's FDA hearings has given him national recognition, and he said several newspapers had called him about his testimony.

Now that the FDA has made a recommendation on breast implants, Resch said he thought his work had been worthwhile.

"I can look back on a decade of work and say I have made a contribution," he said.

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- 9:03 a.m. — Stereo stolen from vehicle, Harper-Schramm-Smith Residence Hall parking lot, \$120.
- 10:40 a.m. — Radio stolen, Love Library, \$60.
- 11:33 a.m. — Metal post damaged, Wick Alumni Center, \$30.
- 12:09 a.m. — Money stolen, Neihardt Residence Hall, \$800.
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