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Inquiry into Belgian cyclist's death raises new fears over EPO

Tally of deaths reaches eight as drug suspicions rise

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Belgian police launched an investigation at the weekend into a second unexplained cycling death, that of a 21-year-old Belgian amateur, Johan Sermon, who died of a heart attack on Thursday night.

Sermon and Marco Pantani - who also died from cardiac arrest, the investigating magistrate in Italy said - are the seventh and eighth cyclists to die from the condition in just over a year. Although there is no evidence directly linking the recent spate of fatalities to banned drug use, a similar cluster of deaths - mainly in the Low Countries - in the late 1980s and early 1990s is now held to have marked the arrival in cycling of the banned blood booster erythropoietin (EPO).

Two police doctors carried out an autopsy on Sermon's body over the weekend and the results are expected in four weeks. "I know that after this death, people will talk inevitably about drug use," said Ernest de Vuyst, manager of Sermon's team, the amateur squad Daikin.

A prosecutor in the Vendée is investigating the death in June of the young professional cyclist Fabrice Salanson, found dead in his hotel on the morning of the start of the Tour of Germany in June. Salanson also died of a heart attack but the prosecutor and his family are paying particular attention to performance tests carried out a few weeks before his death, which appeared to show cardiac abnormalities.

In Italy, a prosecutor is investigating the case of Denis Zanette, a sprinter who collapsed on visiting the dentist last January. Zanette was on a list of riders who had been found in possession of banned drugs by police during the 2001 Giro d'Italia.

It is feared in France and Spain that cyclists are still manipulating their red-cell counts to improve endurance, and that EPO is still in widespread use.

A test is available to detect EPO and several cyclists each season have tested positive since its introduction in 2001. However, it detects only recent use of the hormone, meaning it may still be used in a race build-up.

A letter sent last year from the French cycling federation's doctor, Armand Mègret, to the governing body, about the results of the federation's monitoring of the health of professional cyclists, raised the spectre of EPO again.

Mègret said: "It is clear that there was some external stimulation of the production of red blood cells among 29.2% of the 154 riders tested. The hypothesis that stimulation has been via EPO must be considered."

Mègret added that the abnormal level of ferritin, a protein that stores iron in the body, in almost a third of riders tested may be a sign of the use of EPO. Chillingly, he explained that an excess of iron can lead to liver problems, including cancer.

Mègret also says in his letter that there are indications that 6-7% of riders tested show damage to the adrenal gland and in 90% of cases this is due to "taking cortisone in either a legal or an illegal fashion". This type of damage, says Mègret, could lead to death at any time.

It has also been revealed recently that cycling's governing body, the International Cycling Union, met Spanish officials to discuss a possible upsurge in the use of EPO in Spain. The UCI apparently estimated that perhaps 70 Spanish professionals had used the drug last year.

An ongoing investigation into the Cofidis team in France has revealed the practice of red-cell transfusion, where blood is removed from a cyclist and the red cells are reinjected.

The practice was in vogue in athletics during the late 1970s, and entered cycling in the early 1980s. The introduction of the EPO test may have led to its re-emergence.

Since January 2003, the following eight riders have died from heart attacks:

Denis Zanette (Italy)

Died January 11 2003, aged 32

Zanette, right, collapsed after visiting the dentist. Instantly linked to the use of the blood-booster EPO, which led to an outcry in Italy and demands for stricter drug

controls.

Marco Ceriani (Italy)

Died May 5, aged 16

An elite amateur, Ceriani experienced a heart attack during a race, was admitted to hospital in a coma, and failed to recover consciousness.

Fabrice Salanson (France)

Died June 3, aged 23

Died of a heart attack in his sleep. Was found by his room mate in their team hotel. Had been about to compete in the Tour of Germany.

Marco Rusconi (Italy)

Died November 14, aged 24

Rusconi was leaving the party of a friend last November when he collapsed and died in a shopping centre car park.

Jose Maria Jimenez (Spain)

Died December 6, aged 32

Died from a heart attack in a psychiatric hospital in Madrid. Had retired two years previously but consistently claimed a comeback was imminent.

Michel Zanoli (Netherlands)

Died December 29, aged 35

Zanoli, who retired in 1997, was 35 when he suffered a fatal heart attack.

Johan Sermon (Belgium)

Died February 15 2004, aged 21

Suffered an apparent heart failure in his sleep. Had reportedly gone to bed early to prepare for an eight-hour training ride.

Marco Pantani (Italy)

Died February 15 2004, aged 34