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French regulator probes Roche, Novartis over eye drug

REUTERS

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France's competition authority is investigating drug-makers Roche and Novartis on suspicion they were involved in anti-competitive practices in relation to eye disease treatments, the companies said on Thursday.

This is the second time in as many months that the Swiss drug-makers have faced regulatory scrutiny over treatments for wet age-related macular degeneration (AMD) — a leading cause of blindness among the elderly.

In March, Italy's antitrust authority alleged the firms had colluded to prevent doctors prescribing

Roche's cancer drug Avastin for AMD in favour of the more expensive drug Lucentis marketed by both Roche and Novartis. It fined the companies ₹182.5 million (\$254.2 million).

A statement on the French authority's Website said it had conducted "search and confiscation" operations on April 8 in relation to treatments for wet AMD, but it did not name the companies involved.

Spokeswomen for both Roche and Novartis confirmed the French authorities had started an investigation regarding treatments for the eye condition and said they would cooperate fully.

Roche denied that the two com-

panies had colluded: "Roche confirms there is no agreement between Roche and Novartis that restricts competition."

The latest probe underscores how cash-strapped governments are scrutinising the way drug companies market and sell their products. Italy's competition authorities say the alleged collusion may have cost the Italian health service millions of additional euros for treatment.

Although Roche's Avastin is not approved as a treatment for AMD, it works similar to Lucentis and costs around €30 a dose in France against €900 charged for an injection of Lucentis.

Regulatory