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Rancho Bernardo company tunes into market for hearing loss products with pill

By HEATHER CHAMBERS, The Daily Transcript

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A Rancho Bernardo company marketing a pill it says can prevent hearing loss is urging consumers, scientists and the military to listen up.

Its product, called The Hearing Pill, is an over-the-counter nutritional supplement that relies on an active ingredient called N-acetylcysteine, or NAC, approved for the treatment of acetaminophen (Tylenol) overdose.

American BioHealth Group contends that it neutralizes free radicals and bolsters the ear's own antioxidant defenses. Now, the company says it has scientific proof.

American BioHealth secured a \$75,000 grant through California State University, San Bernardino's Center for Commercialization of Advanced Technology (CCAT) in 2003 to study The Hearing Pill on 566 healthy Marines who engaged in 16 days of weapons training at Marine Corps Recruit Depot (MCRD) that same year.

During the trial, half the Marines were given a flavored drink containing The Hearing Pill while the other half took a placebo.

What the study found was low-decibel music to American BioHealth's ears.

Recently released results from the study showed it "had a significantly positive biological effect in reducing the actual incidence of hearing loss when compared to the soldiers taking a placebo pill."

The study found significant improvements in the Marines' hearing abilities when they sipped a flavored drink before, during and after typical combat training. The Marines were equipped with ear plugs during the training exercises.

American BioHealth CEO and Chairman David Karlman said he expects the company will publish results from the study by the spring.

"We're very excited we got those kinds of results with the ear plugs," Karlman said.

Loud noise is a problem affecting not just military troops subject to the noises from explosions and firing guns but the general public, too. It is estimated by the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association that 28 million Americans suffer from hearing loss.

American BioHealth began selling The Hearing Pill in December 2003 over its Web site after it secured a licensing agreement with the U.S. Navy, which holds the patent for the technology. American BioHealth holds the exclusive right to commercialize the pill.

"We all know that by drinking OJ and taking Vitamin C they don't hit the mechanism of action that causes hearing loss," Karlman said. "But early work in the Naval medical center said what they know about it molecularly could affect the body biologically."

Some critics have their doubts about The Hearing Pill, alleging that it hasn't been proven through the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

Others say it's a promising new pharmaceutical technology that could help millions.

"To go through the military, to do a study in a military environment, they will say you have to do similar work that the FDA requires plus you can do nothing to hinder the warfare," Karlman said.

Karlman credited CCAT with introducing him to the right interested parties.

"We are now actively shopping for a partner that has a big marketing engine, like a big pharma," he said.

The CCAT program, supported by Congress and funded by the Department of Defense, is a public-private collaborative partnership between academia, industry and government. It aims to introduce technology products and services into the commercial and governmental marketplace.

"To me, the important thing is now we can talk about it," said Dr. Stuart Gordon, director of the Office of Technology Transfer and Commercialization at CSU San Bernardino, where CCAT is located. "We can enjoy discussing what they've found out and how it can be used to impact the health of troops."

Karlman said the company is also testing two other products in similar applications.

Additionally, American BioHealth recently received approval for another study of The Hearing Pill at the aircraft carrier USS Nimitz.