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Science breeds new ingredient markets, says Horphag

by Jess Halliday

04/10/2006- **How does a company with just one ingredient continue to report growth on an annual basis? The answer, according to Horphag Research chief operating officer and executive vice president Victor Ferrari, is expanding applications through science.**

Horphag Research has its administrative headquarters in Geneva, but the ingredient around which the business is based, Pycnogenol, is derived from the bark of French maritime pine trees that grow along the coast of South West France. It is contract manufactured in situ by Biolandes.

A constant combination of procyanidins, bioflavonoids and organic acids, Pycnogenol is a powerful antioxidant and anti-inflammatory. It also selectively binds collagen and elastin and aids in the production of endothelial nitric oxide, which helps to vasodilate blood vessels.

It is not new. The first research was conducted on the ingredient 35 years ago. Yet Ferrari told NutraIngredients that global retail sales of pycnogenol-containing products are currently worth around US\$350m.

With a steady stream of new products coming to market, demand continues to rise. Production was scaled up last year and, if the market continues to develop as expected, a new extraction line may be required at the end of next year.

"People ask how can only sell one product and build the opportunities," said Ferrari. "The basic answer is that the product is versatile."

Horphag taps that versatility by ploughing \$1.5m – *"most of its profits"* – into research each year.

"That way the product keeps momentum," said Ferrari. To date, Horphag has over 200 studies under its belt, 70 of which are clinical.

With a clear understanding of the mechanism, the company identifies areas where it expects Pycnogenol to deliver benefits. Some of the most recent areas of benefit studied include hypertension, asthma, chronic venous insufficiency, osteoarthritis, deep vein thrombosis, diabetes management, diabetic leg ulcers and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.

The latest published study in the September issue of *Angiology* looked at reduction of diabetic microangiopathy, and will be reported by NutraIngredients.com later this week.

Ferrari stressed: *"We are not trying to cure disease but to improve peoples lives. It should either have an*

immediate impact or be a long-term preventative."

In the first instance Pycnogenol was a pharmaceutical. Now, 70 to 80 per cent of products are dietary supplements. (The remainder are functional foods, cosmetics. In a few markets it remains regulated as a pharmaceutical).

The ingredient is always listed under its brand name. As the market has moved from single-ingredient herbal products into condition-specific supplements, Pycnogenol is now used in combination with others, in products aimed at supporting heart health, or to help reduce the risk of deep vein thrombosis when travelling, for example.

With the research to support these uses, *"Pycnogenol plays a role as a pillar in what those products do – and differentiates them from others in the market,"* said Ferrari.

But to Ferrari credibility in both the scientific community and the market place is dependent on publication in a peer-reviewed journal. Unless a study has been published – and the company submits negative as well as positive findings – it does not report the findings.

"Companies should refrain from talking about unpublished studies," he said. *"It is unprofessional to release news on a study that has not been published, as it jeopardises peers ability to be objective."*

A research laboratory for a particular study is selected according to its area of speciality and expertise of the lead researcher, and Horphag works with the researcher to develop a study protocol, which is then approved by the institution's ethical board. The study itself is conducted by the researchers without direct involvement from the company.

Horphag's research record helps stave off serious threat from competition. Although some companies have tried to develop cheaper methods of producing pine bark extract, Ferrari explained that any change in the process would yield a product with a different, and possibly inconsistent profile.

"Another may be similar but not identical. In the market place people need to relate the benefits to a product," said Ferrari, adding there are other companies seeking to tap the same market as his company but they are not doing publications.

While Ferrari said that having just one ingredient has helped keep the company focussed, it has taken steps towards introducing a second in the next couple of years.

He revealed that some *"very high quality studies"* have been conducted on it, new compounds patented and a natural source identified. It is not related to pine.

Horphag is also looking at branching out into finished products, following the introduction of Prelox, a patented erectile quality enhancer containing Pycnogenol and L-arginine, two years ago.

Although four clinical studies have been conducted on Pycnogenol's use as an erectile quality enhancer, the company chose to launch its own product rather than marketing this benefit externally in order to avoid confusion over the ingredient's basic benefits.

"Sexual function category is growing, but damage has been done to it with semi-pornographic products, or products with no clinical evidence," said Ferrari.

He said Prelox takes the company *"to a different level"*. It now represents 15 per cent of the overall business. What parts of the manufacturing process it can do internally – from extraction right through to shipping – it does.

Going forward, Ferrari said some new product development is underway, part of which is the patent process. It is anticipated that there may be more news on this front next year.

Jess Halliday's visit to the Landes forest and Biolandes facility was funded by Horphag Research.

