Ginseng benefits on the rise

By Paul Mayne

With the current outbreak of influenza-like illnesses, such as H1N1, many people are trying to boost their immune systems with supplements. Ginseng is often a key ingredient, but its therapeutic use may extend far beyond treating the common cold or flu.

Researchers at the Ontario Ginseng Innovation & Research Consortium (OGIRC) at The University of Western Ontario are investigating whether ginseng can help relieve health problems ranging from diabetes and depression, to obesity and cystic fibrosis.

Ed Lui, Director of OGIRC and an associate professor in the Department of Physiology and Pharmacology at the Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry, says while no clinical trials have been initiated, the OGIRC will be planning for one addressing the benefits of Ontario-grown ginseng on cancer and chemo-induced fatigue and immuno-depression.

A two-day conference at Western last week explored a variety of clinical uses, plant biotechnology, processing, and commercialization of ginseng.

While traditionally used as a tonic, improving energy and the nervous system to counteract physical and mental stress, Lui says the full potential of the herb could be far reaching.

“We are now realizing that it is indeed a multi-action herb,” says Lui, noting its immunostimulation, anti-inflammation, anti-oxidation, anti-angiogenic and anti-inflammatory property.

“We will continue to examine other cellular mechanisms that it may have in relation to other health conditions. We expect our research will uncover new applications.”

Lui adds while ginseng is one of the top selling herbs, most consumers are using it as a tonic without fully understanding its potential benefits.

“The perception of risk and benefit by most consumers is not based on scientific evidence,” he says. “One of our jobs is to educate the public in this matter.”

With Ontario-grown ginseng accounting for more than 60 per cent of the world’s supply, Lui says the other key issue OGIRC is studying is the variability (or consistency) in the product quality of ginseng grown in the province.

“Providing proof for the medicinal effect and understanding the mechanism of action of ginseng would have limited impact on the consumers if we could not guarantee consistency in the quality of ginseng or ginseng products that are sold to the consumers,” he says. “This also explains why our research is multi-disciplinary in nature, involving researchers from medicine, science, engineering, agriculture and plant biotechnology.”

For more information about ongoing work at OGIRC, visit uwo.ca/physpharm/ogirc.

Review highlights barriers

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year. In 2010, the committee will be considering these recommendations in the development of an updated Employment Equity Work Plan.

Tackling a closer look at some of the observations made in the review, several barriers were noted:

BARRIERS TO WOMEN FACULTY

According to the review, there is under-representation of women among faculty. Ten years ago, 30 per cent of assistant professors were women; compared to 40 to 50 per cent at other similar institutions, notes Weedon.

“For some reason the proportion of women hired was lower than at other places.”

In many faculties, positions “at the top” are dominated by men. This may have resulted in the hiring practices of those with decision-making power reflecting areas of research and teaching strengths that interest men rather than women, explains Weedon, but adds, “a lot of it is unconscious.”

Many hiring initiatives were implemented over the last seven years to increase the number of women on faculty, raising the number of new women hires to 40 per cent.

Because assistant professor is an entry position, it will take a number of years for them to advance through the ranks and change the professorate population.

“The initiatives we’ve brought in over the last few years to increase the hiring of women in the professorate are working,” says Weedon. “It’s just that it will take a long time for them to have an impact on the overall numbers across the entire campus.”