

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 proving that it is indeed a multi-action herb," says Lui, noting its immunostimulation, anti-inflammation, anti-oxidation, anti-angiogenic and anti-infective 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 working at OGIRC, visit uwo.ca/physpharm/ogirc.

Review highlights barriers

Continued from page 1

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

Taking 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 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 past 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 professoriate population.

"The initiatives we've brought in over the last few years to increase the hiring of women in the professoriate 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."

The review also points to a lack of support for faculty members and researchers balancing work and family responsibilities. For example, women on maternity leave are not supported for the work required to keep an active research laboratory. With many women assuming a primary role in child-rearing, "the structure of the disciplines is really biased against their career progress," says Weedon.

Helping to address family needs through accommodation has been informally instituted by faculties, rather than implemented as a university-wide policy, he adds.

BARRIERS TO STAFF

(Aboriginal Persons, persons with disabilities and members of visible minorities)

These groups are under represented in professional and managerial positions. Part of this, according to the review, is the lack of external hiring for jobs, which are primarily covered by the Professional and Managerial Association.

Western's online job application system is cited as "atypical" because it doesn't allow for a cover letter and resume to be submitted as one document; the advertisements of jobs on Western's website can go undetected by those unfamiliar with this recruitment channel; and there is limited outreach to encourage applications from these designated groups.

The review notes past negative experiences of Aboriginal Peoples employed at the university may be preventing some job seekers from applying to Western. Changes have been made to make the university a more welcoming environment, however Weedon says the challenge is getting the word out.

"We need to find a way to explain

that to people so they don't continue to think that they shouldn't come to Western because it wouldn't be welcoming."

MOVING FORWARD

Having had the Chilly Climate report and video, as well as the subsequent Voices of Diversity video released last year pointing to issues of equity on campus, Weedon says he was not surprised by the results of the review.

"For me there weren't many surprises in here," he says. "The purpose of holding the review is to give us some basis for deciding how to act. We asked for the review - we commissioned it - and the purpose was to get some advice on what we need to do."

"I think we are doing a lot better than we were, but we can't be complacent."

Similarly, Larissa Bartlett, director of Equity & Human Rights Services, says the review gives Western insight into the "pulse" of the university. The recommendations offer advice for best practices and marry this with the experiences shared during the interviews.

It has been about seven years since Western's last review.

The university has made great strides to improve employment equity and a list of these accomplishments is available on the Equity & Human Rights Services website.

"Western hasn't been sitting back on its laurels doing nothing," says Bartlett. "Every day there are people on this campus who are focused on good employment equity practices."

The complete review, including the 33 recommendations, can be viewed at uwo.ca/equity/esr.htm. Those interested in providing feedback on the review can also do this through the website.

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