

Homespun biotech firm supplements distribution effort

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SENIOR STAFF WRITER

TAMPA — A startup with ties to University of South Florida wants to take a bite of the multibillion-dollar market for dietary supplements.

Natura Therapeutics Inc. launched limited sales of its NutraStem supplement about a year ago and now is widening distribution. The company projects 2009 sales of \$2 million.

NutraStem, a proprietary blend of botanicals and vitamins such as Vitamin D, blueberry and green tea extract, is designed to target adult stem cells, which Natura says enhance and protect the immune system. The company has conducted research on human adult stem cells in vitro, or in test tubes, and performed animal studies.

Natura sells a one-month supply of NutraStem online for \$59.99 and has distributed it through the Davis Pain & Stress Relief Center in Land O' Lakes and a distributor in Brazil, China and more widely throughout the United States.

Stem cells are a natural focus for the company, which shares several key employees with Saneron CCEL Therapeutics Inc., a biotech firm working on cell therapy for early intervention and treatment of disease.

Natura executive VP Cyndy Sanberg is an executive at both firms. Her husband, Paul Sanberg, co-founded both and heads USF's Center for Excellence in Aging and Brain Repair. Paula Bickford, also a co-founder of Natura, is a professor at the center.

CLINICAL TRIALS PLANNED

Some nutritionists are skeptical about claims of health benefits from products that have not been the subject of clinical trials or studies in human beings.

"It's one thing to have something happen in a test tube. It's altogether different to have the same thing happen in a human being," said David Schardt, senior nutritionist at the Center for Science in



JIM STEM

Mike Cole, a senior bioscientist with Natura Therapeutics, works on cell research at the USF Research Park lab.

the Public Interest.

Natura is beginning the clinical trials for NutraStem this year.

The dietary supplement industry is loosely regulated, Schardt said, and companies don't have to prove their product works in order to sell it, so there are low barriers to entry in the industry. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration only gets involved if a company claims its product works like a drug to prevent or treat a disease, and while the FDA does have the power to remove unsafe products from the marketplace, that doesn't happen often or quickly, Schardt said.

Natura has submitted "structure/function" claims to the FDA, reporting everything it claims NutraStem does. That's a plus for Natura when it talks to venture capitalists and potential investors, Cyndy Sanberg said. The company is pursuing venture funding.

Venture funding would allow the Natura

to expand its facilities in the USF Research Park, where it has about 1,500 square feet of laboratory and office space.

The company gets research and development funding from private companies and has pumped some of that money back into product development, Sanberg said. Natura plans to roll out a second product in a few weeks.

EDUCATING CONSUMERS

Estimates of the size of the market for dietary supplements, often called nutraceuticals, vary widely. Tampa pharmacist Thomas Kotronis estimated sales in the United States topped \$30 billion in 2003 when he prepared his business plan for Tampa Bay Nutraceutical Co.

The success of the business is based on advertising that educates consumers, Kotronis said.