

Healthy healing? Despite critics, Biomed Comm continues to develop homeopathic products



Jan 28, 2001, 9:00pm PST
Jeff Meisner
at 425-709-6178 ext. 114
jmeisner@bizjournals.com.

Since 1996, Dr. Barbara Brewitt has built a successful homeopathy products business with more than \$1 million in annual sales.

In 1995, Brewitt formed Biomedical Explorations LLC, which became Biomed Comm Inc. after the company received a research grant from the National Institute of Health's Office of Alternative Medicine in February 1996.

Today, Biomed Comm uses growth hormone research to develop homeopathic products - considered a controversial form of alternative medicine by some in the medical community. Homeopathy is the system of treating disease by small quantities of drugs that cause symptoms similar to those of the disease.

The six-employee firm, sandwiched between the Queen Anne and Fremont neighborhoods of Seattle, has eight products on the market - which run the gamut from increasing vitality, endurance and mental clarity to finding bodily harmony, alleviating menopause to increasing immune support and flu relief.

Years ago, Brewitt, a former Methodist youth minister, saw how disease ravaged young people. She decided to educate herself on how she could help make a difference.

Brewitt completed her Ph.D. at the University of Washington School of Medicine and earned a doctorate in biological structures (she has a bachelor of science degree in health sciences from The Evergreen State College in Olympia). She went on to the federally funded National Institutes of Health where for two years she researched growth hormones - protein molecules that direct cell growth.

For Brewitt, Biomed Comm is a realization of a vision she had years before.

"When I was at the NIH, I realized I was on the cutting edge of biotechnology and I wanted to see how this could help the consumer," she said.

There are those, however, who believe that Brewitt and similar businesses aren't much more than modern-day quacks whose practices are not based on medical science and cause more harm than good to American health consumers.

Enter Dr. Stephen Barrett, an Allentown, Pa.-based psychiatrist who has written many articles and numerous books in an attempt to debunk homeopathy, which he calls "the ultimate fake."

Barrett also runs a number of Web sites, the best known called Quackwatch.com. He is vice president and a board member of the National Council Against Health Fraud, an adviser to the American Council on Science and Health and has received a public service award from the U.S. Food & Drug Administration for fighting "nutrition quackery."

"I consider homeopathy the archetype of a fake," Barrett said. "The data they use is absurd. Most studies are poorly executed and badly designed and the data is unreliable. Most products on the market haven't ever been tested."

Barrett is not alone in his skepticism of homeopathic medicine.

Dr. Mark Juhn, an attending physician at UW's Hall Health Primary Care Center, is cautious about advocating the use of human growth hormone (HGH) products.

Juhn could not be reached for comment this week, but has gone on the record in previous interviews against the widespread use of products based on the human growth hormone.

"The commercial claims for HGH are way overinflated," Juhn has said. "However, human growth hormone does have medical applications. When it's used properly, it's helpful - for example, for children who are deficient in the hormone."

However, HGH is effectively administered to patients in one form - injection, Juhn has said.

Given Juhn's conclusions, the ramifications for Biomed's products - which are mostly in pill and droplet form - are unclear.

Meanwhile, Barrett has unsuccessfully petitioned the Food and Drug Administration to regulate homeopathic products using the same standards used in the regulation of drugs.

Brewitt said she is fully aware of Barrett's views on homeopathy and maintains Biomed Comm's products are studied using the gold standard "double-blind placebo" test.

A double-blind placebo study is one where the administrator of the remedy and the subject do not know which product samples are real and which are the "blank tablets."

"I don't know why Dr. Barrett has such a thing about homeopathy," she said. "But it's good to have people out there posing questions, as long as they are open to answers."

That's just the problem as far as Barrett is concerned. In homeopathy, there are no solid, scientific answers to prove that homeopathy works, he said.

But are homeopathic products harmful to consumers?

"Misinformation is always harmful," Barrett said. "If you drink water, is it harmful? It is if you think it could cure your cancer. It forces a shift in the American consumer away from hard medical science."

Whether it's harmful or helpful, one thing is undeniable: Homeopathy is big business.

According to the Nutrition Business Journal, Americans spent between \$27.2 billion and \$32.7 billion on homeopathic products and treatments in 1999.

Brewitt wants Biomed Comm to grab a small piece of the homeopathic market. The company, which maintains a Web site and markets its eight products to retailers, is bankrolled by investors stretching from the Pacific island country of Brunei to local accredited investors and Ferndale-based Botanical Labs Inc.

In addition to fighting off the stigma of poor science that surrounds homeopathic companies, Biomed Comm faces other challenges.

The market for such alternative remedies has been flat the last two years, Brewitt said. To grow, Biomed Comm needs to hire more sales and marketing employees before the end of the first quarter. Brewitt said she also hopes to ink deals with more distribution partners.

"We're trying to position ourselves for greater investment," she said. "The future of the company is becoming more and more dependent on marketing, so we'll need more capital."

And as long as businesses like Biomed Comm sell products while being watched by the likes of Barrett and Juhn, the debate over whether such remedies reap any tangible benefit for consumers will continue for some time to come.