



Hoodia, the appetite suppressant cactus from Southern Africa, became a hot topic several months ago when it was announced that Unilever acquired the rights to develop and market hoodia as an ingredient in its weight-loss products, most likely in Slim-Fast. The story of hoodia is in fact not new at all. As far back as 1963, the South African State Research Institute CSIR (Council for Scientific and Industrial Research) included Hoodia species in a project on

on to the CSIR, who researched the activity in rats, filed the patents, found a development partner in U.K.-based Phytopharm PLC, who developed the product further and sought out marketing partners—the company signed the contract with Unilever last December.

BUT the situation is not that simple. In fact, researchers from CSIR actually denied that the Bushmen ever used hoodia as an appetite suppressant before their findings in rats indicated this effect. In fact, the organization studied 400 plants from South Africa merely for their safety and pharmacology, and when they studied hoodia, which was eaten by the Bushmen purely for nutrition, they found in rat studies that the animals lost a lot of weight but remained absolutely healthy. So is the bushman story a pure marketing invention?

In 1998, Phytopharm PLC first sub-licensed the rights to develop P57 to Pfizer. But five years later, in July 2003, Pfizer returned the rights for hoodia. The reason for this, according to Phytopharm, was that Pfizer had given up its “Naturaceutical” division. Since this was not Pfizer’s first involvement in the development of botanical products, one might speculate that Pfizer was merely interested in blocking developments, so that competitors would not have access to these new botanical ingredients.

After ephedra was taken off the market, there was a keen interest and need to find a replacement to fill that void. Many companies welcomed news about Unilever’s license for hoodia. The problem is, there is much more hoodia biomass on the market than actual *hoodia gordonii* plants exist worldwide. In reality, we know that only a small fraction of products currently on the market contain the active compound P57, while all other products are derived from other forms of hoodia, even from other forms of cactus coming from various parts of the world including Mexico. Unfortunately, in most cases, consumers are not getting what they should expect from the product.

Hoodia: Business Opportunity or Dangerous Business?

Hoodia has become a hot botanical internationally, primarily because its role in weight loss, but will that market go boom or bust?

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edible wild plants based on ethnobotany of the San tribe in South Africa. In 1995, a patent application was filed, and just recently, on January 27, 2005, the 162-page patent file was granted in an appeal of the European court.

Over the last six months, hoodia has become one of the hottest botanicals on the U.S. market, as well as several European markets. And many finished products sold in the U.S., the U.K. and France, as well on the Internet, all claim to contain *hoodia gordonii*. But the question is, do these products contain the important P57 substance, a group of steroidal glycosides, which has been clinically studied as the active appetite suppressant in hoodia?

To most people, the story sounds logical: When Bushmen in Southern Africa went on long hunting trips for days on end, they could not carry their food along with them, so they chewed on the Hoodia cactus to suppress their appetite. This knowledge was passed

Apparently, Unilever and Phytopharm PLC are not happy with hoodia products developing as a strong market segment. They are afraid that others will capture the market first and that hoodia will be discredited due to bad product quality by the time they launch "Slim-Fast Hoodia" in a couple of years.

The first step the companies took in Europe was to announce that hoodia is in fact regarded as a novel food, requiring novel food registration. As a consequence, it is expected that all existing products will disappear off the European market by September 1, 2005.

Novel food applications require multi-million dollar investments in safety studies. None of the present marketers can afford this process. As such, it is likely that Unilever will use this argument as an opportunity to clear the market of its competitors.

The situation in the U.S. is a bit differ-

ent. According to industry experts, FDA has requested *hoodia gordonii* samples con-

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taining P57 as a quality marker, which have NOT come from CSIR of South Africa (because they do not appreciate the American supplement situation), but from other sources in the Southern African region. It is likely that Unilever's lawyers will try to prosecute manufacturers, based on the hoodia patent, which protects its

use as an appetite suppressant. The interesting question will be whether or not selling dried plant material without making any claims constitutes an infringement of a patent. Some lawyers seem to interpret the mere intention to sell hoodia in the weight loss market as sufficient evidence of patent infringement. Indeed, the situation remains very interesting internationally.

For us as researchers and consultants to the natural products industry, this case shows that the botanical kingdom offers huge new opportunities, which justify a stronger focus on research and development. We are working with companies to find, develop, research and market natural and botanical products, since consumers internationally are looking for natural alternatives to chemical drugs, and more opportunities are expected to come up in the future. NW