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Harvard Anti-Aging Researcher Quits Shaklee Advisory Board

By KEITH J. WINSTEIN

A prominent anti-aging researcher quit the scientific advisory board of a dietary-supplement maker after spending six months helping to promote a syrup that hints at extending life.

Since August, David Sinclair, a professor at Harvard Medical School, lent his support to a Shaklee Corp. drink called the Vivix Cellular Anti-Aging Tonic, touted as "the world's best anti-aging supplement."

Following questions by The Wall Street Journal about his seeming endorsement of the product, Dr. Sinclair resigned from the board last week and now says his name has been misused in connection with Vivix, which contains the antioxidant resveratrol. Shaklee, based in Pleasanton, Calif., disputes this and says he approved all uses of his name in its advertising material.

Dr. Sinclair's resignation ends a short period in which Shaklee's anti-aging syrup could claim the backing of a prominent medical-school researcher. Few makers of dietary supplements have such an ally.

Dr. Sinclair remains co-chief adviser to Sirtris Pharmaceuticals, now a division of GlaxoSmithKline PLC, which is also studying resveratrol for use as a drug. Dr. Sinclair received more than \$8 million when Glaxo acquired Sirtris and the company pays him \$297,000 a year as a consultant. A Glaxo spokeswoman declined to discuss Dr. Sinclair or his association with Shaklee.

Shaklee's grape-tasting Vivix concentrate costs \$100 for 30 teaspoons, a month's supply. It's made of resveratrol, a chemical found in red wine, and other grape extracts. Many supplement companies hawk products that contain the antioxidant, but so far resveratrol has been proven to show benefits only in mice, not people.

"How would you like to feel 25 years younger and live 25 years longer?" asks Shaklee on its Web site.

While Shaklee says the question is rhetorical, such suggestions lack scientific support, some researchers say. "I don't think there's any data that resveratrol is going to be beneficial for slowing aging...in people," said Matthew Kaeberlein, a University of Washington pathologist and former labmate of Dr. Sinclair's at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Roger Barnett, Shaklee's chief executive, says the company doesn't claim that Vivix extends life -- only that it affects certain processes inside the body's cells. The 25-years phrase is "just a question to engage people in a dialogue," he says.

In obtaining the backing of Dr. Sinclair this summer, Shaklee scored a coup. Dr.

Sinclair knows resveratrol; in 2006, he led a study showing the molecule could counteract the ill effects of overfeeding laboratory mice. One notable benefit: resveratrol let overweight mice live about 114 weeks on average, compared with 102 weeks without the chemical.

In August, Dr. Sinclair joined Shaklee's Scientific Advisory Board, a paid position, and enthusiastically introduced Vivix to the company's sales force in New Orleans. He joined Shaklee's chief doctor in a joint radio appearance, and his picture and name are often used on Vivix sales sites run by Shaklee's salespeople.

Shaklee declined to say how much it paid Dr. Sinclair to be on the advisory board. Both sides say he didn't receive Vivix royalties.

Dr. Sinclair -- who has a Ph.D. in biochemistry and molecular genetics but isn't a medical doctor -- now says he was misinterpreted. "I have submitted my resignation to Shaklee and exercised my right to terminate my agreement," he wrote in an e-mailed response to questions. "This decision was prompted in significant part by my recent realization as to how my association with Shaklee and my research have been used contrary to the intents and purposes of my agreement."

"To my dismay I have found numerous uses of my name and reputation on the Web and in other media that implies endorsement by me of Shaklee's Vivix product," he wrote. "I have engaged counsel to deal with this matter and have demanded that Shaklee cease using my name."

A spokesman for Harvard Medical School said the school was also reviewing Shaklee's use of Dr. Sinclair's name and references to his Harvard affiliation, which have appeared on its Web site and in promotional videos.

In a statement, Shaklee said that "every implied product endorsement was in Dr. Sinclair's own words and every Shaklee use of his name -- whether in print or video -- was pre-approved by him in keeping with our agreement."

In November, Dr. Sinclair appeared on a Florida radio station with Shaklee's chief doctor to promote the Vivix tonic. "Based on the mouse studies, we are seeing a lifespan extension of about 20-30%," Dr. Sinclair told the program's host. "That's in animals that are eating an American, unhealthy diet."

That appears to overstate the matter. Going from 102 weeks to 114 weeks, Dr. Sinclair's overfed mice lived 12% longer on average with resveratrol, not 20 to 30%, and normal mice didn't live longer, even with a huge resveratrol dose, according to the peer-reviewed study.

In an e-mail, Dr. Sinclair said he was referring to the portion of the mice's lifespan after they reached the age of one year, a measurement used in his scientific papers. Such a calculation method increases the drug's relative benefit.

At an August sales conference, Dr. Sinclair told Shaklee's salespeople that "over a year ago, we set out together to do this, to make a product that you could actually activate these genetic pathways that can slow down aging." In a video of the conference -- posted on the Internet -- he added, "Together, as part of the Shaklee family...we can take this technology right now, to our friends, to our family, and really have the benefits of this new technology right now, within our lifetimes, and you'll learn more about the Vivix product later."

Shaklee sells its products through a network of 750,000 "members" who work for commissions and recruit other salespeople -- and handle their own marketing. Dr. Sinclair's picture graces the front page of www.live25yearslonger.com, one salesperson's site, where Vivix is said to repair skin injuries, erase age spots, quell tremors and eliminate leg cramps.

Shaklee says it forbids salespeople to claim Vivix affects any disease, and refers noncompliant salespeople for "disciplinary action," which can include terminating their contract. "The vast, vast majority of them are very circumspect," Mr. Barnett says.

Shaklee says more than 100,000 people have purchased Vivix since its August introduction, and orders are backlogged.

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