

New obesity vaccine controversial

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News Staff

University of Alberta medical researchers are unconvinced that a newly announced vaccine will suppress the rise of obesity, explaining that it has the potential to dangerously interfere with the natural reactions of the body.

Earlier this month, Californian researchers announced that they had designed a vaccine to combat obesity and weight gain. According to a study published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, the vaccine inhibited the activity of ghrelin, a recently discovered hormone that triggers hunger when injected into laboratory rats. Results showed that the vaccinated rats didn't gain as much weight and had less body fat than the controlled rodents that were fed the same amount. This is the first published data that indicates preventing ghrelin from the central nervous system decreases weight gain.

Ghrelin is secreted predominately by the stomach, which sends a signal to the brain, stimulating appetite, explained Dr William Colmers, a Professor of Pharmacology at the U of A whose research originally linked the hormone to the desire to overeat. "Giving it to an animal, either in the periphery or in the brain, makes animals eat. When you're hungry, the levels of ghrelin go up and they drop right after you have eaten," Colmers said.

While some researchers find the idea of an anti-obesity vaccine interesting, Colmers is more cautious.

"The idea of making a vaccine for something your body naturally makes is new and is fraught with some potential dangers," Colmers said. "Essentially what you're training your



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A BIG FAT PROBLEM U of A's Dr Baracos questions safety of obesity vaccine.

immune system to do is to react to something that your self produces."

Colmers went on to say that this could cause problems in a person's immune system.

"[There are] a lot of nasty disorders that happen when you become allergic to yourself and your immune system starts attacking components of your body that are important," he said. The idea of a vaccine is a very different concept in fighting weight gain, explained U of A professor of Oncology, Dr Vickie Baracos. Unlike a drug, which requires the consistent intake of a set dosage to be effective, results with a vaccine would be persistent.

"When you're vaccinated against something you're constantly immune to that compound; it's inhibited all the time," Baracos said.

Baracos is also curious to find out what would happen if a vaccinated person developed an illness after taking the vaccine and needed to put

on some additional weight.

"At different times of your life you might want to have more appetite or less appetite," she explained. "People with cancer, as their cancer progresses, they may eat initially 10 per cent less than what they require ... what would happen if, incidentally, one of those people had been vaccinated against appetite at an earlier time?"

Lots of testing still needs to be done with the vaccine, Baracos continued, and as research on obesity continues, questions remain unanswered.

"How many things have you heard of that are claimed to help control weight and appetite? There are a lot of things: there's the topic of scientific research; there's publicity in the newspaper. In spite of a great deal of research and activity, the tidal wave of obesity just keeps getting bigger and bigger ... we really don't have a substantial way to treat people for obesity at this time," Baracos said.

Boycott of Maclean's rankings overdue: SU

MACLEAN'S • CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2

Dr Indira Samarasekera, U of A President explained that the three Alberta presidents visited Maclean's earlier in the year to discuss the ranking, which they felt "were inaccurate and were penalizing Alberta," particularly with regards to admissions averages and the way they treated scholarships. They received no response.

"The difficulty with Maclean's is that they ask us to supply them some of the data. We have to use our resources and then they use the data inappropriately in order to sell magazines," Samarasekera said. "Why should public universities be supporting a commercial enterprise?"

Harrison went on to say that the rankings create artificial differences between institutions, magnifying minor differences.

"Telling someone you came in second is very different than telling them that you were one-hundredth of a second behind the person who came first," Harrison said.

Since the eleven universities bailed out on the Maclean's survey, a twelfth institution, the University of Carlton, has dropped out of the survey. Maclean's has responded by announcing that they will now publish the score that determines each university's rank and launch a new website on 2 November, when the university issue comes out, allowing users to create their own ranking by means of a customized evaluation of the data.

Samantha Power, Students' Union President at the U of A, was supportive of the Administration, noting

that there are better ways to compare postsecondary institutions than the Maclean's ranking, which has held national attention for 15 years.

"I think it's time someone took a stance like this," Power said. "In a lot of other countries, it's the government that sets up a non-profit organization to evaluate universities," she said, pointing to Britain, and adding that, in Germany, it's a coalition of media organizations that evaluates universities.

Maclean's will include the twelve universities who have voiced their opposition in their university issue, using public data create the rankings. And though Harrison said the publication is welcome to use the information, he doesn't think it will have much of an impact.

"I've yet to meet a student at the U of C, or indeed a parent of a student at the U of C, who pays much attention to the Maclean's rankings. In other words, I do not believe that Maclean's provides significant input into most students' decision on where to go to university," Harrison said.

"And I think that's particularly true in Alberta," he added.

Still, Keller maintained that the survey is simply meant to give the public information about universities, not to condemn or reward individual institutions.

"I strongly urge you not to have the idea that this is somehow a magazine that is antithetical to Alberta," Keller said. "Maclean's is hardly setting itself up to figure out how to screw Alberta—the editor-in-chief is from Edmonton."



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