

# Controversial drug under review in Canada

BY TRACY FRAUZEL

TORONTO (CUP) — Drink milk, love life? Maybe not for long.

A drug that has been associated with diseased cows and risks in human health in the United States is currently being reviewed by the federal government for use in Canada.

And the level of secrecy surrounding this investigation has sparked concerns that Health Canada is not capable of making an objective assessment of the recombinant Bovine Growth Hor-

mone (rBGH) that is manufactured by the Monsanto Company based in St. Louis.

The Bovine Growth Hormone, a naturally occurring hormone produced by the pituitary gland of cows, is responsible for growth, metabolism and milk production. When given extra doses of the growth hormone, cows may produce up to 30 per cent more milk.

Controversy in the United States centres around the lack of testing done before the drug was approved for use on dairy farms.

The drug was pushed through the Federal Drug Administration. Only 90 days of research were conducted and there was no rigorous testing for long term effects, including carcinogenic and reproductive tests.

In Canada, the drug has been under review by officials at Health Canada since 1989. Former employees point to mismanagement within the department as the reason for the prolonged study. They believe the review has failed and the allowance of the drug would put the health of Canadians at risk.

Charles Knight was a Florida farmer when he encountered Monsanto's drug, Posalac. This artificial copy of the naturally produced Bovine Growth Hormone is the reason Knight says he retired from the dairy business.

"The first month was miraculous in terms of production, but then we started having health problems with the cows, including mastitis," said Knight.

Mastitis is a painful infection of the cow's udder, and the resulting puss can contaminate milk. Furthermore, the antibiotics that are used to treat the infections may end up in the milk supply.

Monsanto does list increased occurrences of mastitis as a possible side effect on the drug's warning label, along with an increase in cystic ovaries, uterus disorders, digestive disorders and

lesions. But Monsanto doesn't claim responsibility for these problems, which cripple cows and make them unsafe for milk production.

Adele Pelland, a public affairs representative for Monsanto, says this is a legal requirement.

"It's like any kind of label, it has to list possible side effects that could happen. Some of these may eventually be taken off the label if [researchers] find that [the drug] is not causing that," Pelland said.

Knight complained about the side effects to the company, but he says Monsanto didn't help him.

"I called up Monsanto and they said it was my problem, they blamed my management."

He believes the Posalac drug is directly accountable for the mastitis and other side effects his cows have experienced.

"The rBGH kicks the cow into high speed, causing excessive milk production, and that is why you have these stress-related problems with it," Knight explains.

Knight's cows eventually became immune to the antibiotics and he discovered that many of

them could not be used for milk production anymore.

"My veterinarian finally said, 'If you don't quit using rBGH, I can't help you'," Knight said.

"It was like they were addicted to it, then they just stopped producing."

In addition to the crippling effects of the drug on cows, Knight is also concerned about the incidental health risks to humans. The cows were being given antibiotics to combat diseases induced by the use of rBGH. Trace amounts of these antibiotics could show up in the milk supply and would then end up on kitchen tables across the country. According to an independent study by Dr. Samuel S. Epstein, published in the *International Journal of Health Services*, these small doses could effect human immune systems over time.

Other farmers are not deterred by the risks. For them, this is a profitable business. But because of the growing controversy surrounding the drug's use in the U.S., most of the farmers using Posalac will not openly admit it.



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