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Not so sweet anymore: Aspartame under fire Study reignites dispute over cancer risk

By Melanie Warner

NEW YORK: When Dr. Morando Soffritti, a cancer researcher in Bologna, saw the results of his team's seven-year study on aspartame, he knew he was about to be injected into a bitter controversy over the sweetener, one of the most contentiously debated substances ever added to foods and beverages.

Aspartame is sold under the brand names NutraSweet and Equal and is found in popular products like Diet Coke, Diet Pepsi, Diet Snapple and Sugar Free Kool-Aid. About 200 million people consume it worldwide, according to the Calorie Control Council, a trade group for makers of artificial sweeteners.

Soffritti's study concluded that aspartame may cause cancer.

The study, which involved 1,900 laboratory rats and cost \$1 million, found that the sweetener was associated with unusually high rates of lymphomas, leukemias and other cancers in rats that had been given doses of it starting at what would be equivalent to four to five 20-ounce, or 0.6 liter, bottles of diet soda a day for a 150-pound, or 68-kilogram, person.

The study was conducted at the European Ramazzini Foundation of Oncology and Environmental Sciences, a nonprofit organization that studies cancer-causing substances. Soffritti is its scientific director.

The findings, released in July, prompted a flurry of criticism from the Calorie Control Council, which has spent the past 25 years trying to quell fears about aspartame. It said Soffritti's study flew in the face of four earlier cancer studies that aspartame's creator, G.D. Searle, had underwritten and used to persuade the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to approve it for human consumption.

"Aspartame has been safely consumed for more than a quarter of a cen-

tury and is one of the most thoroughly studied food additives," read one news release from the council, which was established in 1966 by the low-calorie and diet-food and beverage industry.

At the same time, Soffritti's findings have energized a vociferous group of researchers, health advocates and others who say they are convinced that aspartame is a toxin associated with a variety of health troubles, including headaches, dizziness, blindness and seizures.

Soffritti, who oversees 180 scientists and researchers in 30 countries who collaborate on toxin research, said that since last July, he had been contacted by some of these critics, including a member of Parliament in Britain and a number of conspiracy theorists, some of whom said they had suffered from "aspartame poisoning."

No regulatory agency has yet acted on Soffritti's findings, although Roger Williams, a member of Parliament, called for a ban on aspartame in Britain in December.

Last month, the European Food Safety Authority, an advisory body for the European Commission, began to review 900 pages of data from Soffritti. The goal is to finish by May.

A commission spokesman, Philip Tod, said it was too early to know what the next steps would be if the scientists reviewing the data agreed with Soffritti's findings.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration said it had also taken note of the study, available online at <http://ehp.niehs.nih.gov/docs/2005/871/abstract.html> and scheduled to be published next month in a medical journal financed by the National Institutes of Health.

But both the U.S. drug agency and the European Commission have asserted that there is no need for people to avoid aspartame.



Pigi Cipelli for The New York Times

Soffritti, an Italian researcher, led a study that said aspartame may cause cancer.

"We don't see any concerns at this stage," said George Pauli, associate director for science policy in the U.S. agency's Office of Food Additive Safety. "We've gone through a humongous amount of data on aspartame over the years."

Putting restrictions on aspartame would come at a significant cost. Food companies and consumers around the world bought about \$570 million worth of it last year.

Lance Collins, chief executive of Fuze Beverage in Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, said that safety concerns about aspartame were a "major contributing factor" in his decision to use sucralose in his tea and juice drinks. Sucralose, however, is made by under a patent by just one company, Tate & Lyle of London, and is in desperately short supply.

Soffritti, who has spent 28 years doing research on potential carcinogens, said he was trying to steer clear of the growing political maelstrom. But he added that he was concerned about the large numbers of people who use aspartame, particularly children and pregnant women.

"If something is a carcinogen in animals," he said, "then it should not be added to food, especially if there are so many people that are going to be consuming it."

Lyn Nabors, executive vice president of the Calorie Control Council, said Soffritti's study was not valid because the rats used in it had been allowed to live longer than the two-year standard established by the U.S. government's National Toxicology Program.

"It's difficult to determine if the cancers you find are due to something else," Nabors said.

"Just as in humans, the rat's body slows down later in life, and the aging process causes all kinds of things," he said.

But John Bucher, deputy director of environmental toxicology at the National Toxicology Program, the U.S. government's agency for research on toxic chemicals, said that he did not think the fact that rats were allowed to live until their natural deaths had skewed the results.

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