

South Africa to research mood-lifting plant

October 1 2010, By JENNY GROSS , Associated Press Writer



This photo supplied by Halls, Gericke and Hofmeyr (HGH) Pharmaceuticals and taken Sept. 18, 2009 shows the indigenous plant, *sceletium tortuosum*, in the Karoo in South Africa. The plant, that the San people have long chewed, to reduce stress, relieve hunger, sedate and elevate moods is to be marketed internationally. (AP Photo/Nigel Gericke HGH Pharmaceuticals - HO)

(AP) -- For hundreds of years, indigenous South Africans have chewed a plant they say reduces stress, relieves hunger, sedates and elevates moods. Now they have a license to study and market it, and plan to sell it over-the-counter worldwide.

Researchers say the plant, called *sceletium tortuosum*, has great potential and could also help boost the local economy. Still, the American pharmaceutical company working on the project says it doesn't know whether the plant has been approved by U.S. regulators or how soon it may be available to consumers.

On Friday, South Africa's environmental minister traveled to the country's arid southwest where the plant is found to celebrate the issuing of the first license of an indigenous plant to the South African company HGH Pharmaceuticals.

HGH has not registered the product, which they will market as a [dietary supplement](#), in any country, as the company is still compiling scientific and technical data, said Nigel Gericke, director of research at HGH.

"We're positioning (the product) for everyday people who are having a stressful time in the office, feeling a bit of [social anxiety](#), tension or in a low mood," Gericke said.

The plant - known within South Africa as Kanna, Channa or Kougoed - has been used by the San people to reduce hunger, thirst and fatigue and is said to have [sedative](#), hypnotic and mood-elevating effects. It is commonly chewed, but also can be made into tea or smoked.

Ben-Erik Van Wyk, a professor of botany and [plant biotechnology](#) at the University of Johannesburg, said he's extensively researched the plant and found no ill effects or evidence of dependency.

Van Wyk, who has worked with a researcher at the company that will be marketing it but is not involved in the project, said he hopes the plant may draw attention to the wisdom of the ancient San people, sometimes referred to as Bushmen.

When chewed, the plant gives a slight head rush, which is similar to the effect of smoking a cigarette, Van Wyk said.

"It's a product with huge potential," he said. "Anyone who has chewed it and has experienced the sensation of the plant definitely knows there's something happening."

"So often traditional remedies are looked down upon as old-fashioned and outdated," Van Wyk added. "If this product becomes a huge success, the culture will become more respected and better known."

Gericke first read about the plant in 1985 while paging through a botanical book in a public library in Australia. When he returned home to South Africa, he and a psychiatrist visited regions of the San people to research doses and side effects.

HGH has an agreement with Morristown, New Jersey-based P.L. Thomas & Co, which plans to launch the product in 2011, said spokeswoman Paula Nurnberger.

It may be some time before consumers get a chance to try a pill containing the plant's extracts, which they hope to market over-the-counter as Zembrin. Nurnberger said she does not know whether the product has been approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

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