

LIVING

Cancer patients drink fermented soy

'Stinky tofu' believed by some to shrink tumor cells

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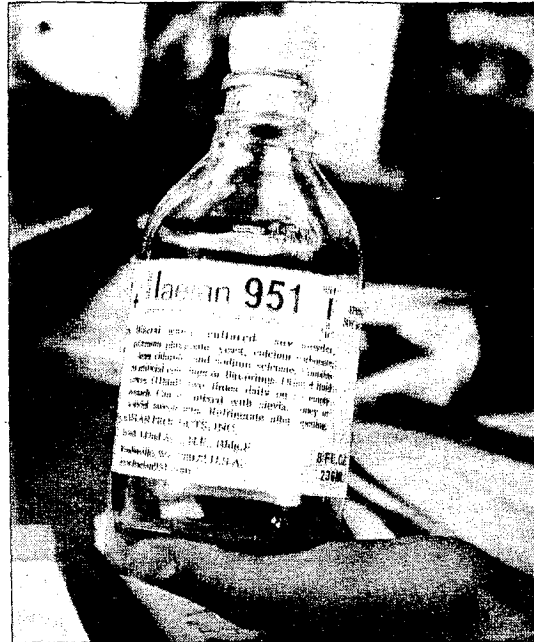
NEW YORK — Haelan is a thick beige liquid made of fermented soybeans that tastes like bitter earth. But for a growing number of cancer patients, it offers the sweet hope of recovery from the disease and especially from the harmful effects of cancer treatments.

Wendy Brantley, 26, of Lewisville, Texas, is a believer in Haelan, which remains little known in traditional medical practice and is not approved by the Food and Drug Administration as a cancer therapy. Brantley has lived with spinal cancer for half of her life and has found relief from the debilitating side effects of chemotherapy after she started drinking Haelan six years ago.

Dr. Vijaya Nair said "We call it stinky tofu back home." Nair, a Singapore native, is the director of clinical trials for the Haelan Research Foundation, a Seattle-based nonprofit group.

In China, fermented soy has long been valued for its high nutritional content, and scientist Walter Wainright brought it to the United States 14 years ago. Wainright, founder of the research foundation, also started Haelan Products to manufacture the drink.

The fermentation process, according to Wainright, concentrates soy's nutrients, which aid the body's ability to shrink tumors while keeping healthy cells strong so that patients can handle the toxic effects of chemotherapy.



Haelan, a fermented nitrogenated soy drink, is believed by some homeopathic practitioners and some cancer patients to help the body maintain good health. The drink, which is produced in Mongolia

started her on Haelan. She stopped taking chemotherapy and began drinking a bottle of Haelan a day. It brought her body back to health and the tumor didn't grow, Brantley said.

It has been hard for Brantley to afford Haelan even at the discounted rate of \$30 a bottle. Brantley and her mother have had to be resourceful in order to raise enough money for the treatment. If Haelan were to be tested and approved by the FDA, it could lead to increased production and lower costs for patients.

Nair and Wainright would like to conduct clinical trials in order to gain FDA approval and increase Haelan's availability as a cancer therapy alongside chemotherapy and radiation. But there's a Catch-22: In order to raise money for clinical trials, more doctors and patients need to purchase Haelan. But without clinical trials and published results, it is very difficult to persuade physicians to use it.

In the meantime, Brantley takes her chemotherapy, drinks a bottle of Haelan every morning and seems perfectly healthy to the unsuspecting eye. Her boyfriend fills the bottle with water when she's done and drinks the last drops of what he calls "the magic juice."

toestrogens found in soy are far weaker than the estrogen produced by the body or found in contraceptives, which can be harmful to breast cancer patients, she said.

Brantley is not interested in the medical controversy. She has gone through two operations, radiation and three different types of chemotherapy since the seventh grade. Although the first operation was a success, her right side was partially par-

alyzed after the second one. When the tumor returned in 1998, she was too weak for another operation so her doctors turned to radiation therapy. But the radiation caused memory loss, and her doctors chose to administer chemotherapy, which made her depressed. Her physicians then tried yet another kind of chemotherapy.

Brantley's grandfather was also fighting cancer and introduced her to a nutritionist who

Ensuring that cancer patients receive proper nutrition as they battle the disease is a major challenge. According to the National Cancer Institute, 40 percent of cancer patients in the United States die of malnutrition, not the disease itself.

But some experts warn that Haelan or any soy product could be harmful to certain cancer patients because of the natural estrogens that soy contains. "It would be dangerous for patients with breast cancer as, obviously, a soy product contains phytoestrogens," Dr. Barrie Cassileth, head of integrative medicine at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Can-

cer Center in New York, wrote in an e-mail message. "It probably won't hurt people who can take in soy products, but it's not likely to help anyone, either."

Ann Gaba, a clinical nutritionist at Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center, concurred. "That's pretty controversial," she said of Haelan therapy. "A lot of breast cancer patients avoid soy, especially if they're taking tamoxifen."

Nair, the Haelan researcher, dismissed the concerns. "That's nonsense, that's the old way of thinking," Nair said. The phy-