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Could Fiji kava capsules be the answer for anxious Australians?

By Catherine Graue on Pacific Beat

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Statistics suggest that one in every four Australian adults will experience anxiety at some point in their lives — that adds up to around five million people.

Treatments vary from psychological therapies to medications like anti-depressants, but what about kava?

Pacific islanders have been using it for centuries, and swear by its calming effects.

Clinical trials in recent years have tended to support that claim — for milder types of stress and anxiety — and now there's a push to get kava capsules onto supermarket shelves in Australia.

An Australian-based company that sells kava products, including capsules manufactured at its factory in Fiji, announced this week that it has secured a deal to stock their kava capsules in one of Australia's largest supermarket chains from June 2020.

Fiji Kava's chief executive Zane Yoshida told Pacific Beat "it is a significant breakthrough for us, particularly with visibility at retail [level], Australia-wide".

Professor Jerome Sarris leads the Healthy Minds Research team at the NICM Health Research Institute in Sydney and he has been involved in several clinical trials investigating the impact kava can have on anxiety levels.

Professor Sarris is also now involved in paid scientific advisory work for Fiji Kava.

"Kava used in a recreational sense, for stress, anxiety, improving mood...the data does strongly support that," he told Pacific Beat.

But kava has a troubled history as a complementary medicine.

Products were withdrawn from European and North American markets in 2002 because of health concerns, and Australians were also advised not to use medicines containing kava following reports of a death linked to acute liver failure.

After a 2003 safety review, it was recommended that only certain forms of kava were "suitable for use in Listed medicines" and Australia's Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) changes its regulations, placing a 125 milligram limit on the amount of Piper methysticum, or kava in each tablet or capsule.

Zane Yoshida says their capsules contain less than half that amount.

"The recommended dosage for kava on a daily basis by the TGA is 250 milligrams. We have 60 milligrams for capsules, so we recommend two to four capsules per day," he said.

Experts agree that amount is considerably less than what is consumed when someone drinks kava shells.

"If you were to drink ...a shell...of Kava liquid, that would be around about 100 milligrams of kavalactones per shell. And on an average Saturday night, I would probably drink 20 or so of those shells. So what we're

kind of talking about here is...quite chalk and cheese," Dr Apo Aporosa, a research fellow in the School of Health at the University of Waikato.

Professor Jerome Sarris says there's scope for more research and for the recommended dosages to be updated.

"Even though it's not recommended from our TGA...the reality is probably higher doses, used acutely, would have a stronger effect in terms of reducing anxiety".

While welcoming the developments, Dr Aporosa said it is time the Australian government reviewed its broader rules on kava, so people who want to feel its effects in the more traditional, recreational, settings can benefit as well.

"I agree that covered in capsule forms has the ability to to reduce anxiety, help you sleep. But please don't throw the baby out with the bathwater," he said.

"There needs to be a serious policy shift by the Australian Government to allow a substance that is non-addictive, non-euphoric. It doesn't cause all the issues that are suggested and get the facts out there. Allow people to be able to consume something that allows quality conversation".

In December last year, the Government doubled the amount of kava powder that people can import to Australia for personal use, to 4 kilograms per person.

The Government is promising to pilot a trial of commercial kava imports by the end of this year.

Australia's Health Department told Pacific Beat it is currently finalising a consultation paper that will set out the key elements of the pilot.

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