

Suburban Life

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CAMILLE MCCOY/staff photographer

Virinder Moudgil, a molecular endocrinologist, uses calf uteruses in experiments at his Oakland University laboratory to test the effects of RU 486.

OU scientists study the French drug

By Carol Azizian
staff writer

VIRINDER MOUDGIL wants to be prepared for the day when the controversial drug RU 486 hits the United States market.

The molecular endocrinologist has been testing RU 486 on calf uteruses in his Oakland University laboratory for three years.

He prefers to think of himself as a "basic scientist" who, so far, has been able to distance himself from the debate surrounding the drug.

"It is very naive to think we can suppress scientific progress," he said. "If political and social pressures stop it here, people will get the drug from France or someplace else."

Pro-life groups call the drug a "death pill" and want to stop research on the abortifacient, while pro-choice lobbies cautiously sup-

port ongoing studies in both the United States and abroad.

RU 486 is an antiprogesterone steroid, which blocks the action of progesterone — the substance that prepares the uterine lining to receive a fertilized egg. Without progesterone, the body sheds the uterine lining and the embryo.

In a University of Paris-Sud study of 100 women who were less than a month pregnant, 85 women aborted within four days. The 15 subjects who failed to abort experienced some uterine bleeding. (The study was reported in the New England Journal of Medicine.)

RESEARCHERS contend that when RU 486 is combined with small amounts of prostaglandins, biological compounds that cause the uterus to contract and help expel the embryo, the success rate is close to 100 percent.

Although few side effects have



RU 486 has added more fuel to the abortion fire.

been reported, the long-term effects of RU 486 still remain unknown.

This is where Moudgil comes in. He has been studying how progesterone works since 1969. In 1983, he took a sabbatical and spent several months in the laboratory of Dr. Etienne-Emile Baulieu, the French physician who pioneered development of the steroid.

After returning to his lab, Moudgil wrote to the French pharmaceutical company Roussel-Uclaf, asking for the compound.

"I am using RU 486 as a tool to understand how the natural hormone — progesterone — works," he said. "And by knowing how RU 486 works, we can avoid potentially dangerous side effects."

He wants to avoid the type of problems experienced by daughters of women who took the morning-

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RU 486

Death pill or new contraceptive?

By Carol Azizian
staff writer

IT'S CHEMICAL warfare against the unborn or the most revolutionary family planning method since the birth control pill.

It's a death pill that eliminates the "silent screams" of surgical abortions or a technological redefinition of contraception and abortion.

The name sounds as innocuous as a "Star Wars" robot, yet the French drug RU 486 has generated more energy during heated debates in the United States and abroad than the "FORCE" ever did — in all the universe.

The New England Journal of Medicine calls it a "major advance that will . . . provide new options for women."

Congressman Robert K. Dornan, R-Calif., who has unsuccessfully sponsored legislation to stop research on the abortifacient, says he can't swallow "this death pill with closed eyes."

Diane Trombley of Troy, public relations director for Right to Life-Lifespan, shudders at the thought of "at-home abortions."

Dr. Louise Tyrer, vice president of medical affairs for Planned Parenthood Federation of America, believes it would be a "tremendous advantage" for women.

Scientists in New York and California are continuing clinical trials of RU 486 on humans. But major U.S. drug companies such as Upjohn are steering clear of the controversial compound.

"ABORTION is a very traumatic word," said Dr. Etienne-Emile Baulieu, the French physician who pioneered development of the steroid. "Nobody likes the idea of suppressing something."

"But there are (hundreds of thousands) of women around the world dying from unwanted pregnancies and mechanical abortions. We'll be giving women freedom and the possibility to plan families in better conditions."

Baulieu recently participated in a conference on steroid receptors at Oakland University, Rochester Hills. More than 100 scientists in the forefront of endocrinology attended the meeting, organized by Virinder K. Moudgil, a molecular endocrinologist at OU.

"RU 486 generates controversy because it blocks progesterone action," Baulieu said. "The time at which (the drug) can intervene is very early — when implantation is not definitive. It takes several days to be definitive and functional."

"That's why I've proposed to get rid of both the contraception and abortion concepts — to explain this sort of intervention — and call it contra-gestation, meaning against pregnancy."

THE DRUG can be taken up to six weeks after a woman becomes pregnant. It's an antiprogesterone

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Dr. Etienne-Emile Baulieu, inventor of RU-486, recently attended a conference on steroid receptors at Oakland University.