

Cera Products Looks For Mass-Market Breakthrough

By Len Lazarick

The Cera story begins with victims of cholera in Bangladesh, moves on to sweat-drenched, muscle-sore athletes and, in its most recent twist, to dry-mouthed, headachy sufferers from hangovers.

Founded seven years ago to market a new oral rehydration product first developed for the diarrhea that is one of the worst killers in developing nations, Cera Products hopes that its line of powders and drinks for athletes, travelers and the sick are ready to make a mass-market breakthrough.

"I want it in every home," said Cera president Charlene Riikonen. But "it's not easy or a lot of companies would have done it."

So far Cera Products has been heavily test-marketing its line of rice-based oral electrolytes that correct hydration and restore cell balance and fluid for a variety of conditions. The products were developed by physicians at Johns Hopkins Hospital and are currently being sold to Hopkins, the Mayo Clinic and several of the most prestigious teaching hospitals in the country.

"It's a good, all-around, all-purpose product to have in your medicine bag," said Fran Lessans, president of Baltimore-based Passport Health USA, a nationwide chain of clinics for overseas travelers that provides CeraLyte to its clients. "It's really a palatable product and it's got a lot of versatility." I've had clients use it for jet lag."

Adventure Medical Kits of Oakland,



Charlene Riikonen

Calif., which sells travel medicine products to major corporations and travel agencies, has recently added CeraLyte to its kits, replacing the packets of salts developed by the World Health Organization.

"Charlene really makes a great product," said Amy Quirk, president of the company founded by a Stanford University physician. "They're 30 percent more effective [than the WHO salts] because they're rice-based" and "they're flavored so people are more likely to use them."

Whether products for travelers suffer-

ing from "Montezuma's revenge," the elderly laid low by an intestinal virus, athletes gushing sweat, or the overindulgent that have had their systems flushed by alcohol, "the principle behind all of them is the same," said Riikonen, and the company uses the same rice base for all its products.

Long-chain carbohydrates made from rice have proved to be an ideal medium to restore body salts, and clinical trials have found them to be more effective than the glucose-based drinks that are heavily marketed to athletes.

Cera makes packets of flavored powder that can be mixed with water or juice or cooked up as a broth, and it has also developed drink-sized containers for immediate use.

"All the water in the world doesn't have the right properties," said Riikonen, who says the sugary athletic drinks are at least better than water. "When you're having sweat loss, you shouldn't just replace it with water."

And while antimotility drugs like Imodium can stop the symptoms of diarrhea, they do little to restore the lost bodily fluids needed to keep veins flowing and cells functioning properly.

"Something like this is safe," Riikonen said, "letting the body naturally take care of itself."

For Riikonen, the company has been a labor of love that began in 1982 with her

first trip to Bangladesh. "I got deathly ill," she said. "I didn't know anything about oral rehydration."

While Cera and its products have been recognized by medical experts in clinical trials at Hopkins and Walter Reed Army Medical Center, they haven't been recognized yet by marketplace. "We're small," said Riikonen, whose office is in a Jessup industrial park. "We're a little bit of David and Goliath."

"I consider what we've been doing as test market sales," she said. It's only this year that she's hired a national sales manager to set up a distribution network and has begun redesigning the packaging to make it more attractive for consumer sales in drug stores and supermarket aisles.

She's also been working with McCormick & Co., the Maryland spice firm, to improve the flavoring of its products.

Cera's new hangover remedy, Hydrad-I, may be the product that helps get the company to register on the radar screens.

The manufacturing of all the products is being handled by plants outside Maryland, but "I'd like to bring this back home to Maryland," said Riikonen.

She'd also like to attract more investors to the company, in addition to last year's "angel investor" who prefers to remain anonymous. "I didn't feel we were ready for that until now," she said. "I think we could be big."