

Things could be looking up for Viagra challenger

Pharmaceuticals

Jill Margo
Health editor

Manufacturers of a novel gel designed to treat erectile dysfunction are about to apply for the product to be approved in Australia.

Called Eroxon, the gel has been approved in Britain, Europe, the US and some Middle East countries.

The British company that makes it, Futura Medical, says it works in 65 per cent of cases of erectile dysfunction (ED), but some specialists are sceptical of such a claim, particularly for a gel.

The claim is high given Viagra-type drugs work in about 70 per cent of men. Viagra has been available for 25 years and many of its rivals have come and gone, leaving it and others in its class, such as Cialis and Spedra, leaders in the field.

Eroxon gel is on sale over the counter in Belgium and Britain. To be sold in Australia, it would need the approval of the Therapeutic Goods Administration. A spokesman said the company was about to make a submission.

The company says the non-medicated hydro-alcoholic gel can help men get an erection within 10 minutes of applying it to the head of the penis.



Darren Katz

Men need to apply a pea-sized amount which then evaporates, cooling the skin by about 10 degrees in 60 seconds.

Then it produces a gradual warming effect which is said to stimulate nerve endings, which leads to increased blood flow. The company said that in its study of heterosexual couples, about 30 per cent of partners applied the product for the man.

The full results produced by this study have not been published. The US Food and Drug Administration approved the gel earlier this month and said it planned to release the results.

Futura Medical chief executive James Barder said the company had met the FDA's high standard of approval with a submission of 22 clinical, biocompatibility, human factors studies and performance bench tests.

The FDA and other regulators have classed the gel as a medical device, not a drug, because it works through mechanical rather than chemical means.

Dr Michael Lowy, a leading Sydney specialist in men's sexual health, said any benefit from the use of a safe topical application to improve erectile

function was a welcome addition to treatments. "While it's interesting, and probably harmless, it's hard to imagine that an over-the-counter preparation that you apply topically could offer more than a placebo effect," he said. He said that for the gel to affect the internal blood flow of the penis, it would have to penetrate the tunica, a tough barrier that protects erectile tissue.

Associate Professor Darren Katz, who leads the Urological Society Australia and New Zealand Andrology Special Advisory Group, said the gel was a potentially exciting new product, but predicted "there may likely be a benefit only for mild ED".

He said an approval for a medical device might skip some checks and balances necessary for a drug approval. The gold standard for testing the gel would be a placebo-controlled study.

Because ED could be associated with serious medical conditions, such as blocked arteries, the condition provided an opportunity to screen men for health-related issues. If they bypassed the doctor and bought the drugs or gel directly over the counter, this opportunity was lost, he said.

Further, no single treatment suited everyone and by consulting a specialist, men received a personalised approach to their issue, he said.

Students rate tiny college ahead of nation's top unis

Learning

Julie Hare
Education editor

A tiny private college in Brisbane with just 15 courses has got the tick of approval for student experience while some of Australia's most prestigious universities linger at the bottom of the pile.

Leaders Institute, which has just a handful of courses in business, agribusiness and accounting, was given a 100 per cent rating by its students for the quality of their educational experience.

Meanwhile, four of Australia's biggest and best-respected institutions – Sydney, University of NSW, Melbourne and Monash – were among the bottom six, receiving scores of between 68.8 per cent approval and 72.7 per cent, said the survey published by the federal government.

Data is collected from domestic and international students across 141 higher education providers, including 42 universities.

As in previous years, smaller universities dominate the top of the list. The University of Divinity, Avondale University, Bond and Edith Cowan were the top-ranked universities.

Among private colleges, Jazz Music Institute, Sheridan College and the Australian College of Theology are con-

sidered the best by their students in the government's annual student experience survey.

Approval ratings are rising again after tanking in 2020 as COVID-19 shut campuses and learning went online. International students are happy to be back on campus with their scores equalling those of domestic students for the first time, rising 7 percentage points since 2021.

Students studying agriculture and environmental studies (84 per cent) rated their overall experience highest.

"The great results underscore Australia's great reputation for delivering high-quality education," said Education Minister Jason Clare.

However, as *AFR Weekend* has reported, many students are disappointed, if not angry, at the quality of their university experience.

"Australians tend to hold this almost subconscious ideal of what a university is as a place of otherworldly higher learning. Yet, it is also a place which churns out credentials, so people can get a job," said University of Melbourne Professor Michael Wesley.

"That sets a tension between what people experience when they go to university, which is very big institutions that tend to anonymise students," he said.

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