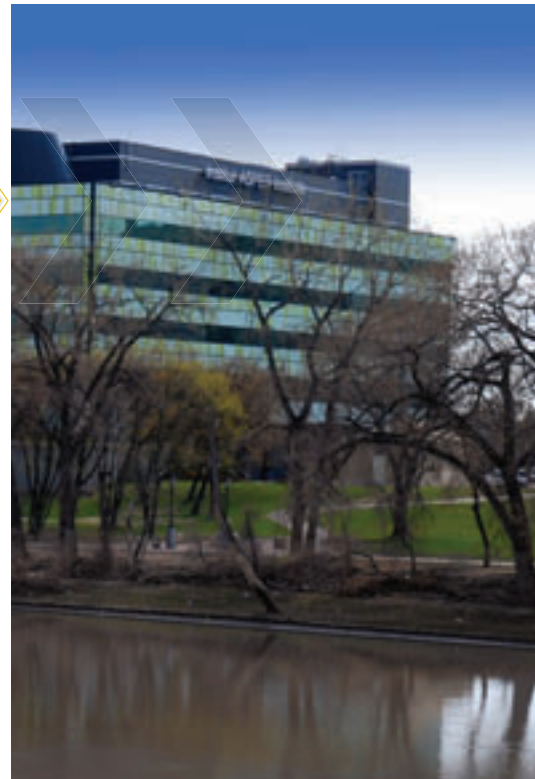


GUIDEPOST

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Healthy outlook

A hospital in Winnipeg is testing your future. Don't believe it? Grain giant JRI does

By Tom Button, CG Editor

We tackle the question right away. I start by saying that in just about every meeting I've ever attended where there's been a speaker talking about health-enhancing functional food crops, there's also been a farmer in a back row who pipes up, "Oh yeah, and on which half-acre am I going to plant that?"

Across the table from me, Paul Brise-



Paul Brisebois, Canbra Foods

bois responds with a nod and a smile. He sympathizes with the farmer. As assistant vice-president at Canbra Foods — the food arm of James Richardson International — Brisebois hasn't climbed where he has without a healthy shot of realism.

Brisebois likes numbers. He likes proof. Most surprising of all, he also likes the outlook for functional foods.

Uncomfortable with overstatement, Brisebois measures his words. "It isn't going to happen overnight," he says. "It may take 10 years, maybe even more, but the science is impressive, the needs are real, and it looks like this is an opportunity that could well be good news for agriculture."

"The challenge is going to be to grow the business in a sustainable way," Brisebois says, then adds, "Yes, I think we're beginning to see how that might happen."

When James Richardson International made a 2006 donation to the University of Manitoba to help it set up the \$25-million Richardson Centre for Functional Foods and Nutraceuticals, functional food supporters around the world began thinking it would turn out to be a watershed moment.

Here was proof, they said, that international powerhouse Western Canada was buying into the science. With that clout behind the industry, the idea that functional foods would be bit players in agriculture's future started to dissolve.

Plus, the world looked at the twin mandates of the Richardson centre. Not only is it charged with doing functional food science, says Curtis Rempel, the centre's research development manager, its job is also to look at ways to bring partners together to build a viable industry for Manitoba and the West.

"We're a catalyst," Rempel says. The centre is focusing Western research on big-acreage crops ranging from wheat, barley and oats to canola, pulses and flax. It's also probing the health benefits of blackberries, raspberries, Saskatoon berries and a range of native plants.

The centre provides high-powered technology that lets scientists work with such crops on a molecular level, finding the components that are linked to health benefits, and then testing and refining those components to edge them closer to commercial realities.

Adding even more energy, the Richardson centre is networked with the other Manitoba-based organizations which anchor the Manitoba Agri-Health Research Network, namely the Canadian Centre for Agri-Food Research in Health and Medicine (CCARM) and the Food Development Centre.

To an outsider, it's a confusing array of acronyms, scientific specialties, and unpronounceable chemical names. To



Food and pharma are merging, say Bram Ramjiawan (left) and Peter Zahradka

insider Peter Zahradka, CCARM team leader, it's actually much simpler. "It's momentum," Zahradka says.

"It's also credibility," Zahradka says. Until now, 'real' scientists have looked down on the study of food health claims. It's like the contrast between a fully outfitted research lab versus an organic bulk food store.

That's changing, "There's a growing recognition that foods will be essential technology for the many serious health challenges that we face," Zahradka says.

Already, the Manitoba project is incorporating people who never thought they'd be involved in agriculture. Bram Ramjiawan, for instance, readily admits that despite his many years in university he scarcely knew what it means to work a field, or what a crop of canola looks like.

He didn't need to know. Until mid-winter, Ramjiawan worked inside Canada's National Research Council, helping ensure that new drugs and medical devices are tested according to the strictest scientific protocols.

Now, Ramjiawan is director of research innovation and regulatory affairs at Winnipeg's St. Boniface General Hospital Research Centre. There, he oversees its ambitious testing program, including an emerging stream of crop-based functional

foods with the potential to become important new market options for Canadian farmers.

For Ramjiawan, his career is a sign of how two separate industries are evolving. Medicine and agri-food are merging, Ramjiawan says. "There will be very little difference between a drug company and a food company," Ramjiawan says. "The joining of food and pharma is the next big wave. If you're not already there, you should be."

They're lured not only by new science, but also by the sheer magnitude of the potential market. Canadians already spend over \$4 billion a year on dietary supplements and related products. At the same time, food-related issues such as diabetes and obesity are reaching epidemic proportions.

The sector won't be based on traditional niche concepts, Brisebois predicts. Success will come from adapting key Western crops to have functional or pharma quality traits versus inventing a new crop to solve health problems.

Brisebois believes it's time for farmers to begin thinking about how they'll take advantage. "It's time for all stakeholders in the industry to take a closer look at how functional foods can create significantly more value in agriculture and solve many significant health related issues," Brise-

bois says. "Not only are we going to need quantity to feed the world, we are going to need quality to keep the world healthy."

"We have an opportunity through functional foods," Brisebois adds. "That's why we are a significant supporter of the Richardson Centre."

The best way to start, he suggests, may be to look at how the industry is likely to be structured. Brisebois doesn't foresee farmers having to specialize in one specific small-acreage functional food trait.

Instead, he sees opportunities for farmers to set themselves up to grow a variety of segregated functional food crops based on contracts offered through regional buyers.

One year, a grower may produce buckwheat crops targeted at people with heart ailments. The next year, it might be barley crops that fight obesity. Or the producer may grow both, with several others in addition.

In other words, farmers won't align themselves with specific niches. Instead, they'll have the ability to grow high-quality, segregated fields of whatever functional food crops they contract that particular year.

"It's a vision of what agriculture can be," Brisebois says. "Ask yourself: as a consumer, wouldn't you rather be healthy because of the food you eat than because of all the pills you have to take?" **CG**