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Newsweek

November 3, 2003

NewsweekInternational.com

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MEDICINE

A Russian firm is marketing a pill that is supposed to alleviate the worst symptoms of the dreaded hangover. Bottom's up!

A Drunk's Best Friend

BY FRANK BROWN

Everyone and his grandmother has a cure for a hangover. But whether it's a raw egg for breakfast, a feast of menudo (boiled tripe), a swig of pickle juice, a handful of aspirin or a hair of the dog that bit you, few remedies actually do the trick. An inventor from Russia, of all places, has finally stepped up to the plate. SKS Alyans, a Moscow firm, is marketing a pill called Antipokhmelin—"anti-hangover" in Russian. The pill is selling steadily in pharmacies across Russia, and it's proving even more popular in the United States under the name of RU-21, where it's been promoted as an invention of the KGB.

The official story behind Antipokhmelin's arrival is more a case of the Waiting Game than of Spy vs. Spy. In 1972, in Pushchino, a small town south of Moscow, a young Soviet researcher named Yevgeny Mayevsky developed a harmless compound, containing succinic acid, that seemed to eliminate hangovers. He tested his pills on dozens of eager volunteers willing



THE MORNING AFTER: Myasnikov (right) hawks his anti-hangover pill



to drink 200-gram vodka shots, and the government gave him a production license, conditional on his finding a manufacturer within six months. But in those cold-war days, no one had money for hangover remedies. So for 28 years the pill's only beneficiaries were Mayevsky's family and friends. The rest of the world was stuck with raw eggs.

In 2000 a former colleague of Mayevsky's who had acquired business connections in Russia took the concoction to SKS Alyans, which started mass-

producing it. Now it's available to us all. And in part thanks to its alleged KGB connection, which CEO Dmitry Myasnikov neither confirms nor denies (Mayevsky says it's a "fairy tale"), the pill has received much positive press around the world. Myasnikov's U.S.-based partner, Georgian-born Emil Chiaberi of Spirit Sciences USA, expects to sell 1 million pills this month and projects that sales next year will top \$130 million. He says he's been courted in recent weeks by entrepreneurs from Asia and Europe.

What makes this hangover remedy unique is that it may actually work. When alcohol enters the bloodstream, the liver quickly converts it to acetaldehyde, a noxious chemical that causes headaches and other hangover symptoms, and then slowly turns the acetaldehyde into harmless acetic acid. Antipokhmelin helps by slowing the production of acetaldehyde. Mayevsky's 1972 trials were effective in four of five drinkers. In 2000 the Russian Ministry of Health confirmed that the pill worked on both rats and humans. Soldiers who took Antipokhmelin after consuming a half liter of vodka in an hour reported milder hangovers than those who had not. The pill is sold in the United States as a food supplement, which doesn't require testing.

Even if the pill works, some critics say it only encourages alcohol abuse. "People just need to stop drinking," says Moscow physician Yevgeny Lavrentiev. But the pills, he says, "are telling people that you can control this process. And that is just going to lead to the growth of alcoholism in the population."

At least in Russia, cost and convenience have limited the pill's attractiveness. Since you need one pill for each shot of vodka, you'd have to munch down a bowlful to get you through a liter. That costs about \$3, almost the price (\$4) of a bottle of vodka. Pickle juice is a lot cheaper.

With TEMMA EHRENFELD

