Non-addictive ADHD med looks to remove stigma of current drugs

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Pen-written notes all over the desk, doodles in a spiral notebook weeks-old, a new text message, Facebook notification, Snapchat; students are bombarded with so many stimuli today that paying attention to a teacher in a lecture hall that can hold three football fields inside it is no simple task.

With the ample amount of distractions that flood our judgment daily, it's challenging for not only students without attention disorders but especially for those diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. On top of the influx of distractions students fend off today, those with the disorder taking medication are obligated to take drugs that can be highly addictive because that is all the market offers—FSU Professor Pradeep Bhide is working to create a change.

Bhide is currently working on a non-addictive ADHD drug that works very differently from drugs on the market today. With assistance from colleagues from Massachusetts General Hospital, Dr. Thomas Spencer and Dr. Joseph Biederman, the neuroscience physicians hope to revolutionize the field and the drugs it provides.

"There is a stigma associated with [ADHD] drugs that most parents don’t want to give it to their kids," Bhide said. "Only about 40 percent of children with ADHD actually are treated today because of that stigma. The medications today work very well, very reliable and very consistent but kids who take it can lose appetite, lose sleep."

The product Bhide is researching is unique in its process. This kind of research is not being done to the scientific community anywhere else.

"This product doesn’t produce the dopamine high that can be produced when the stimulants are taken at higher doses," Bhide said. "The product we’re producing doesn’t create that type of high which means it doesn’t have the abuse potential. We also believe this drug will have neither of the two side effects of stimulants [sleep loss and appetite loss] and ultimately it will be more acceptable and people will not be afraid of it."

Zachary Leibovitch, Florida State freshmen, has taken ADHD drugs since he was tested for the disorder in the first grade. In his opinion, as he grows older, the disorder relies more on the person’s motivation to focus than complete reliance on the drug itself.

"[A non-addictive ADHD drug] would be something that is incredible if it works the way it is supposed to," Leibovitch said. "At the same time, since I’ve been taking it for so long, I don’t think it’s something I’ve become addicted to. It’s become more mental. There comes a point in your life where you kind of have to grow out of it and I’m in that phase. You kind of use the drug as like a mental reminder. The drug is just something that you use as a placebo. You can’t just take your Adderall and say ‘I’m going to automatically go and do work,’ you still have to actually push yourself."

As for the stigma toward medications on the market today, Leibovitch feels that with any new drug that could potentially reach pharmacies will hold the same stigma, addictive or non-addictive.

"There is this stigma that it’s addicting and, like I said before, it’s all mental and that’s why people usually take it during finals week because they think that it’s just going to work and partly it does but it’s also a lot of chemicals boosting your adrenaline and your motivation," Leibovitch said. "At the same time, I don’t think a [non-addictive drug] could hold its weight. You could test the drug and you could do all of these different things to verify that it works but still, people will always have that negative connotation, so I think it would be really harder to make a drug and have it immediately change the way people think."
Dr. Bhide is currently getting financial support from FSU and he explained how substantial that is for the validity of his new product. With backing from the university, Bhide has been able to pursue private investors to help support his research as well. Within the next year, Bhide hopes to have large-scale experiments conducted on animals and the ultimate long-term goal would be to have this product FDA approved within the next five to eight years. Although Leibovitch disagrees such a longstanding stigma could be extinguished with a non-addictive drug hitting the market, Bhide believes this drug will change the way society looks at the disorder and its treatments.

“We want to make this available as treatment to children,” Bhide said. “Right now, our goal is to bring it to market. I really want to see it available on the market so if this replaced existing stimulants making stimulants harder to obtain we will probably help in reducing problems with abuse and more importantly this will be more acceptable. A child with untreated ADHD almost always becomes an adult with ADHD making their jobs harder and harder so it would be better if more children could take it. For this particular research, that’s what we hope we can do.”