FSU Researcher has idea that could prevent pre-term labor

TALLAHASSEE, FL — A Florida State University researcher is tackling a new and inventive way to slow down and maybe stop preterm labor.

Associate Professor James Olcese is developing light emitting devices – somewhat like goggles that could intermittently flash a blue light at a sleeping pregnant mother at risk for preterm labor. The flashing light could cause a drop in melatonin, which is tied to contractions.

This could slow down or stop the labor process.

“They could simply have them on their night stand and put them on if they are feeling contractions,” Olcese said.

In 2009, Olcese discovered that many women go into labor at night when melatonin is at its peak. Future research through a partnership with preterm labor patients at Tallahassee Memorial Hospital found that when women were exposed to bright light overnight, the cells associated with contractions saw a drop in melatonin levels, suppressing contractions and potentially delaying labor.

“We can use that information to develop ways of helping women either in inducing labor or, conversely, mechanisms that would prevent or slow the contractions a month or two earlier in the pregnancy,” Olcese said.

Olcese patented his theory that reducing melatonin would produce better results for women at risk of preterm labor.

He recently won a $35,000 GAP award from FSU. The funding will be used to fund a second trial at Tallahassee Memorial Hospital and help figure out how to best deliver the blue light flashes. Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston is testing out Olcese’s approach as well.

“We just have to figure out how much light and how often,” he said.

Depending on how the next round of studies go, a product could be ready for market in the next few years.

Preterm birth is the birth of an infant prior to 37 weeks of pregnancy. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, one of eight infants in the United States is born prior to the 37-week mark.

Thirty-five percent of infant deaths are associated with preterm labor.

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