



expense of consumer safety

hopes government opinion, long on the side of Searle, may soon shift once an investigation begins. "I think that will embarrass Searle," he said.

Aspartame also makes for booming business in Canada, though the federal government has taken no initiative of its own to study aspartame. Instead, the health and welfare department evaluated the Searle investigation approved by the FDA, and approved use of aspartame just six days after it was approved by Washington.

John Salmimoon of the department's health protection branch

defends the government's decision as accountable and reasonable.

"We have no doubt in our minds, based on the data that we have, that aspartame is safe," he said. He also dismissed Leonard's objections to marketing the product while it is still being studied in laboratories.

"Studies on food additives are always going on. There'll be studies on aspartame for years to come," he said.

Lubin of the AMA said "I would be surprised if evidence

came to light that aspartame was unsafe."

Consumer complaints and investigations aside, Searle must also deal with a growing amount

of media concern. Numerous articles in the print media, as well as investigative reports on CBC's Sunday Morning and Market Place, have prompted Searle's

American and Canadian divisions to counter negative publicity with a new multi-million dollar campaign. Using press briefings, advertising, and "information

bureaus," Searle wants to diffuse public tension about the sweetener. (Besides "unsafe," "sweetener" is one word Searle refuses to call aspartame, because of negative impressions following the debates and subsequent bans on saccharin and cyclamates.)

Searle stresses aspartame does not cause PKU, can be used during pregnancy, and is fine for children, despite the AMA warnings. It also says aspartame is a "natural" product, containing aspartic acid and phenylalanine, two amino acids found in many protein-enriched foods. Searle literature heavily promotes the "protein" connection, although as American science writer Ellen Ruppel Shell says, "aspartame is far from a natural construct."

Rod Leonard agrees. He says the promotion campaign is "trying to make aspartame look like a natural product, like eggs, milk, bananas. It isn't. It's a chemical that doesn't occur in nature and that is produced through only the most intense chemical mechanisms."

As well, foods such as eggs and milk contain many other types of amino acids, and in far less concentrations. The chemical makeup of aspartame makes it 180 times as sweet as sugar.

Aspartame critics say pregnant women should not take aspartame because it may affect the mental health of the fetus. As well, most expecting mothers don't know of the hazards of aspartame and phenylketonuria, or that one in sixty people carry a PKU gene (two genes cause the disease).

Aspartame research, though, does show an eight-can-a-day drinker like Pat Tobin is not in danger — the limit for adults is about 12. The limit for small children, though, is much less than that — four. And because many products containing aspartame, including gum, desserts, and soft drinks are marketed directly towards children, many may be far exceeding the recommended limit of safety.

Leonard says disastrous effects of aspartame on young people might be found in years to come. Because the brain forms until the age of six, high aspartame intake could be wreaking havoc on many youngsters.

"We don't know what the long term consumption of aspartame will be. In 40 years will there be conditions that we can trace back to aspartame?" he says.

Searle and companies that use aspartame are required by law to advise consumers that products contain the sweetener. However, advertising and marketing promotions give the impression that

the aspartame marker is an attraction, and not a warning.

"What they're selling is a lifestyle," Tobin says. "Those commercials are slick, slick, slick. The advertising exploits several vulnerable groups — children, young girls, the overweight. They're marketing it as a lifeline, and it isn't."

While Tobin was coping with sleep loss and dizzy spells, she also noticed no significant weight reduction. According to an article Shell wrote in the Atlantic, "controlling weight has far more to do with curtailing fat than with curtailing sugar and that obese people are more likely to have a 'fat tooth' than a sweet one."

In other words, while the sweet tooth is fooled, the rest of the body, including the bloodstream, isn't. The body automatically looks for more food, and may not lose any weight at all, according to research by Katherine Porikos of the Foothills Hospital in Calgary.

Although participants monitored in her 1979 study reduced their calorie intake when sugar was unknowingly removed from their diet, they increased their intake of other substances. "They eat a bit more of everything — starch, protein, and some carbohydrates," she said. She said her short-term study yielded no positive proof that aspartame can help lose weight.

Marsha Sharp, a Toronto dietician and executive director of the Canadian Dietetic Association says she has recommended aspartame to clients in the past. "I'd recommend it, and will do so again." She says the promotional war between Searle and the battered sugar industry, with each promoting adverse effects of the other can confuse people. "The war between the two is like a Pepsi and Coke war — it's like six of one and a half dozen of the other," she says.

Porikos is cautious of both side of the aspartame debate. "There's a lot of speculation and hype," she says, although there is not enough information gathered on aspartame to "show whether this would actually help people."

"The lack of information is a crime," says Tobin, who was not aware of most information about aspartame until she had stopped consuming the additive. She says products containing the sweetener should be taken from the shelves until the sweetener is declared safe by acceptable sources.

Tobin says she feels bitter about using aspartame in ignorance. "I thought they would be selling it unless it was safe," she said.