Manuka honey's medical marvels measured in gold

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The scientist who discovered the original manuka honey activity has put his name to a new standard that guarantees consumers are getting the genuine article.

The surging global demand for the proven health values of New Zealand manuka honey is creating a major ethical concern in the way it is being marketed to consumers, says Professor Molan MBE, from the University of Waikato's Honey Research Unit.

Prof Molan has now put his name to the Molan Gold Standard™, the new standard that defines manuka honeys with the unique bioactivities identified in his research.

Manuka is now one of the world's great health honeys and one of the great food icons of New Zealand. This year parallel research by science teams in both the UK and Australia confirmed New Zealand's manuka honey to be a powerful antibiotic against drug-resistant super-bugs.

However, care is needed in marketing to consumers, Prof Molan says. "Not all manuka honeys have true medicinal bioactivity beyond the range that's normal of all honeys, and the industry is exposed if it does not make the distinction clear for consumers," he says. "Several manuka honeys called 'active' in combination with a number have little or none of the non-peroxide activity that is the key to its distinctive antibacterial qualities."

Prof Molan, who is now regarded as the world's foremost authority on medical honeys, is concerned non medical-grade manuka honeys could be used for medicinal purposes by unknowing consumers. Active manuka honey can sell for about $65 for a 250gm jar in countries such as the UK.

"The more powerful the research results proving manuka honeys health benefits, the more important it is for consumers to purchase the correct honey," Prof Molan says.

Because of this uncertainty, the University of Waikato is providing manuka honey marketers with the new international standard allowing consumers to readily recognise authenticated medicinal honeys. The trademark to represent the new standard has been developed by WaikatoLink, the research commercialisation company of the University of Waikato. It will be on manuka honeys in the UK within weeks and on New Zealand shelves by the end of the year.

Fraser Smith, a WaikatoLink Commercial Manager, says the name Molan Gold Standard is instantly linked with the honesty and integrity of Prof Molan – the man whose research made manuka a New Zealand icon.

"Professor Molan has agreed to put his name to honeys that meet his own ethical and scientific standards. This means the honeys deliver the medical and health values that the Honey Research Unit is discovering," Mr Smith says.

Recent research by the University of Sydney confirms Prof Molan's own work that shows that harmful bacteria are unable to develop resistance against the antibacterial activity of manuka honey. Antibiotic resistant bacteria are now a major problem in community and hospital acquired infections with very limited options for treatment. "Superbugs such as MRSA and VRSA now untreatable by antibiotics are unable to develop resistance to the bio-activity the Molan Gold Standard measures. The potential really is quite significant," Prof Molan says.

All honeys possess a level of natural antibacterial activity, Prof Molan says, but manuka (and some
closely-related Australian species) contain bioactivity that is found only in their honey. This bio-activity comes from molecules in levels unique to these honeys and is not destroyed by commercial processing.

He says the manuka honeys that meet the Molan Gold Standard have the original bio-activity he discovered (known in research literature as non-peroxide activity). "It's a bio-activity that is proving to be the most versatile antibiotic available to medicine for combating difficult persistent infections. It has amazing potency against harmful bacteria and yet, surprisingly, it assists in restoring the balance of good bacteria in our bodies," Prof Molan says.

It's effective against subcutaneous infections, eg acne and sinusitis. "And we are also starting to understand how the bio-activity can work within the body and why it could have a major role to play in digestive health and for its anti-inflammatory properties."

Methods for measuring these new and novel bio-activities in honeys (antioxidant and anti-inflammatory), have also now been developed.

University of Waikato Vice-Chancellor Professor Roy Crawford says Waikato did not hesitate to back Prof Molan's new standard because it will help consumers. "Peter created this $100 million a year industry and now consumers will be guaranteed quality thanks to this Molan Gold Standard."