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News

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* * * * * *Rabbit 30K played--and plays--a star role in diabetes research.

DALLAS--Bugs Bunny you may know. And Peter Rabbit.

So, who in hell is Rabbit 30K?

Aha, therein lies the story--a tale of an unsung hero who someday may occupy a historical niche along with the dog who helped discover insulin.

The dog has received countless tributes. So far, Rabbit 30K has simply been, er, stuffed.

Rabbit 30K lived a long and a pampered life at the Veterans Administration Medical Center in Dallas. In fact, she occupied a sort of "rabbit presidential suite," isolated from the other rabbits so as to keep down the possibility of her contracting a rabbit disease. Once when other rabbits got sick, researchers jokingly suggested renting 30K a room at the Fairmont Hotel.

The reason for all this seeming falderal is that 30K's body had the highly unusual property of making elegantly specific antibodies to a hormone called glucagon.

It was Dr. Roger Unger, a professor with The University of Texas Health Science Center and the VA hospital, who discovered that glucagon is as important as insulin in the mechanism of diabetes. While the discovery of insulin is considered to have retrieved millions of lives, the research with glucagon goes on--the prize being the complete management of diabetes.

And 30K's serum is the best test in the world for glucagon today.

That's the reason that sales of 30K's serum have been used to support 25 post-doctoral fellows in diabetes research and have paid for a lot of needed supplies for the diabetes lab during the past 10 years. Sort of a million dollar-bunny.

Today, 20 microliters (about 0.004 teaspoon) of serum brings \$250 although 30K has been dead eight years. Of hundreds of rabbits injected with glucagon, 30K was one of very few to produce an antibody and to play an essential role in Unger's discovery that an excess of glucagon--as well as a lack of insulin--is involved in the diabetic process.

Although other rabbits produced antibodies to glucagon, 30K's seems to have the highest concentration (0.004 teaspoon does 2,000 blood tests), it has the highest "affinity" for glucagon (being able to detect a very small amount) and it is very specific in attaching to the C-terminal part of the glucagon molecule. Most other antibodies attach to parts of the molecule that are like other compounds, yielding a false test result if the sample contains any of these other compounds.

Unger thinks 30K should share some of his credit. (He's received the Banting Award, the Claude Bernard Medal, etc., etc.)

While Rabbit 30K was alive, she was cared for by Albert Wolf.

"Mr. Wolf nursed her like a child," recalls Virginia Harris, senior research associate. "And when she died, Mr. Wolf cried like a baby, and he was depressed for days and days." Harris thinks 30K died of old age. "She was seven years old, and that's old for a rabbit."

Today, while there's enough of 30K's precious serum still in the freezer to last for several years, the researchers are looking for new talent.

It may not work exactly like central casting at a Hollywood studio, but a lot of eyes are turned toward a cute little thing named Rabbit 04A.

The story may not be over.

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