Functional Foods in Europe

International Developments in Science and Health Claims

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Where are the challenges and future opportunities for functional foods? Historically, there has been association between foods and health, but for functional foods to have a place in public health it will be necessary to optimise both the nutritional value *and* taste. With increasing knowledge of human genetics food may play a role for the individual needs and predispositions. Also, emerging food technologies can potentially lead to increased safety, convenience, quality and nutritional value, but these new technologies will only be an asset if their application is transparent to the consumer.

The future of functional foods will depend on continued advances in food science and developments of innovative technologies, facilitating regulatory milieu and improved consumer understanding of claims.

These issues were discussed by more than 300 experts from universities, food related companies, government and research institutions representing 45 countries at a 3-day symposium held in Portomaso, Malta, 9–11 May 2007. The symposium was organised by the International Life Sciences Institute – European branch (ILSI Europe) in collaboration with Malta Standards Authority, University of Malta and ILSI Southeast Asia.

The Maltese Minister for Health, the Elderly and Community Care Hon. Louis Deguara opened the symposium. Mr. Deguara emphasised the need to bridge the gap between industry, academia and government and provide the forum for stakeholders to meet and discuss scientific issues for the benefit of public health.

Messages from the Symposium

Claims

Currently, health concerns of non-communicable diseases have necessitated investigating into options for dietary interventions including the role of functional foods and how to communicate responsible health and wellness claims.

Globally, different approaches have been taken to formalise the scientific substantiation of claims. The attendees heard various examples of this, including the current situation in the US, developments in Southeast Asia and the Japanese FOSHU system.

The current status of developments and progress in Europe on the health claims guidelines was presented by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA). The chair of the Codex Alimentarius Committee on Nutrition and Foods for Special Dietary Uses (CCNFSDU) emphasised the need for high quality human intervention studies in supporting claims made on foods.

The European regulatory terrain related to functional foods was presented by the EC Health & Consumer Protection Directorate General, who discussed the aim of and remaining work in the implementation of the regulation on nutrition and health claims made on foods, which entered into force in January 2007. The UK Food Standards Authority (FSA) described some of the challenges faced from a national perspective in establishing a list of claims based on generally accepted scientific evidence.

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Nutrient Profiles

The chair of the EFSA's Panel on dietetic products, nutrition and allergies (NDA) highlighted some central issues of nutrient profiling. It was emphasised that a profile of one food does not necessarily have to match the overall profile of a balanced diet. From the consumer perspective, it is important to keep in mind that the consumer does not need to understand the complex scheme behind the appraisal of a food by using nutrient profiles.

Risk-Benefits

Risk-benefit analysis is also an important issue for functional foods. No food carries zero risk and although this is a difficult concept for consumers to comprehend, the safety of functional foods should be benchmarked to other foods, rather than chasing zeros.

Consumer Perspective

Consumers struggle to understand health claims made on foods. The consumers' understanding and behaviour are affected by a range of influences relating to health and lifestyles, and often appear contradictory. Consumers do not see functional foods as a separate and specific category of foods, and it is a formidable challenge to communicate dietary advice to consumers in such a way that their behaviour is actually changed for the better.

Roundtable Discussion

A roundtable discussion provided the audience with the opportunity to dig deeper. The previous days' presentations, discussions and questions from the floor led the panellists to conclude that:

- the EU regulation on claims represents a positive contribution to the future development of functional foods in Europe;
- continued research in the field of food functionality will be important in sustaining the current upward trend in innovation of functional foods;
- education will be important in raising consumers' awareness of the potential benefits;
- labelling claims have a part to play in the educational process.

'Shopping' and Networking

The symposium poster session had contributions from around 90 experts. 'Shopping' around the posters provided a good opportunity for networking and to discover new exciting research from around the world. ILSI Europe awarded travel grants to ten competent PhD students and post-docs from Central and South Eastern European and the Baltic countries, providing them a unique opportunity to display a poster and discuss their research with the many renowned experts present at the symposium.

All in all, the meeting provided a 'not to be missed' forum for dialogue between stakeholders from industry, academia, government and research institutions on the current status of health claims made on foods and future challenges and opportunities for the growing area of functional foods. At the end of the symposium numerous new contacts had been made between participants, old acquaintances rekindled and a fertile ground for new collaborations and innovative projects was primed.

If you did miss the symposium, a summary report will be published in the *ILSI Europe Report Series* and the full symposium proceedings including papers of the presentations will follow later. Posters, presentations and upcoming publications are downloadable from the ILSI Europe's website: <http://europe.ilsio.org/>.

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