

Invited Speaker Plenary 1: Functional Foods

Functional foods in Europe: state of the art and future perspectives

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Background - Diet and health as research priorities have taken a major role in the European Union in the 1990's. Focus areas have included diet and cardiovascular disease, bone health, physical performance, body weight regulation, diet-related cancer, mental state and performance, and gut health and immunity. These areas have significantly progressed and developed within European Community funded research programmes during the 1990-2005 with intensive collaboration e.g. with Australian researchers. During the same period, European Community has supported two major collaboration projects named Functional Food Science in Europe (1) and PASSCLAIM (2). These have enabled the European researchers to work closely together and to involve industry, scientists and regulators in the process to first develop guidelines and priorities for functional foods and then agree upon methodology to assess the substantiation of effects. The target has been to set the basis for a clear and consumer oriented legislative development in terms of functional foods health claims.

The objective - To develop regulations for functional foods using high standards and extensive processes for the assessment of scientific support for claims on foods.

Outcomes - The process has completed European consensus on defining functional foods as foods that have scientifically documented health effects beyond normal nutrition. The collaboration of academic scientists, industrial scientist and regulators from all European Union countries has created a unique and special background. By providing consensus agreements and scientific assessment framework that can be used throughout Europe the process has improved the credibility of potential claims for consumers and provided background documentation for those making and regulating health claims. Currently, both health claims related to the generally accepted role of nutrients and other substances as well as health claims related to diseases risk reduction have been proposed in Europe. The process has been discussed in the Parliament and proceeds towards finalizing the rules. At the same time, the European Food Safety Authority is preparing guidelines for practical demonstration of health claims and nutrient content claims. The process has been ongoing for ten years and has also facilitated the introduction of several new food products with scientifically demonstrated health effects. Focusing on food and health research by the industry has resulted in benefits for all consumers.

References

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2. Aggett P, Antoine J-M, Asp N, Bellisle F, Contor L, Cummings J, Howlett J, Müller D, Persin C, Pijls L, Rechkemmer G, Tuijtelaars S, Verhagen H. Passclaimm Process for the assessment of scientific support for claims on foods. *Eur J Nutr* 2005; 44: Suppl1:1-30.