Dietary Supplement Use in Women: The Role of the Media

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ABSTRACT Women and other consumers obtain information on supplements from a variety of sources, including health professionals, but most frequently the media. Although scientific conclusions are methodically scrutinized, news stories are judged by instant appeal. Dietary supplements add a complicating twist because folkloric use pre dates scientific research by thousands of years. The incongruity between science and the media perpetuates misinformation and fails to provide the context that gives scientific research meaning. The International Food Information Council (IFIC) and the IFIC Foundation seek to bridge the practice and the communication of science. The IFIC Foundation’s biannual analysis of food news revealed that in 1999 and 2001, science experts were the primary source of information for articles but context was often absent or incomplete. The media’s major obstacle in communicating science is a lack of understanding of the scientific process. It is imperative that emerging science is meaningfully translated for the public. The Harvard School of Public Health and IFIC Foundation convened an advisory group in 1997 to examine the communications process. The result was a set of questions meant to guide the communications process: Will your communication enhance public understanding of diet and health? Have you put the study findings into context? Have the findings been peer reviewed? Have you disclosed the important facts about the study? Have you disclosed all key information about the study’s findings? The advisory group agreed that funding sources should be disclosed but that findings ought to stand on their own merit. In addition, guidelines for various specific communicators were created. J. Nutr. 133: 2008S–2009S, 2003.

KEY WORDS: • supplement • nutrition • emerging science • communications • media

Participants in the workshop Dietary Supplement Use in Women learned that women of varied backgrounds have been using dietary supplements for many generations to optimize health, prevent illness and even self-treat disease. Consumers obtain information on supplements from a variety of sources, including health professionals, but most frequently from the media. A good understanding of the role the media plays in conveying health, food and supplement information will improve the ability of science and policy communicators to improve public understanding.

The health effects of supplements is only one of the many scientific issues needing responsible communications. When any scientific study is concluded, it is unlikely that its findings will be the final word on a subject. Rather, scientific conclusions and the methods used to reach them are deliberately and methodically scrutinized for accuracy, validity, reliability and applicability. Conversely, news stories are judged by their instant appeal—the effect of a headline or the allure of a sound bite. Scientists may view the practicality of a specific study’s conclusion much differently from those who report the information to the public. Dietary supplements add a complicating twist to the communications mix because folkloric use and motherly advice on use may differ from those who report the information to the public. When any scientific study is concluded, it is unlikely that its findings will be the final word on a subject. Rather, scientific conclusions and the methods used to reach them are deliberately and methodically scrutinized for accuracy, validity, reliability and applicability. Conversely, news stories are judged by their instant appeal—the effect of a headline or the allure of a sound bite. Scientists may view the practicality of a specific study’s conclusion much differently from those who report the information to the public. Dietary supplements add a complicating twist to the communications mix because folkloric use and motherly advice on use fail to provide the wider context that gives single scientific conclusions their meaning.

To meet this communications challenge, the International Food Information Council (IFIC) seeks to bridge the gaps between how science is practiced and how science is communicated to opinion leaders (those who have influence with consumers). IFIC’s mandate is to facilitate communication among the media and other communicators so that consumers are given an appropriate context for science-based information. Although IFIC is supported primarily by the broad-based food, beverage and agricultural industries, it does not lobby nor

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does it have a policy charge. The IFIC Foundation is the educational arm of IFIC and further helps the media, educators, health professionals and scientists effectively communicate nutrition and food safety to the public.

Providing the bridge between scientific research and communication with the public is particularly relevant because consumers are consulting a widening variety of sources for health and nutrition advice—sources that can sometimes be confusing and contradictory. The American Dietetic Association’s trends survey shows that journalists are the primary deliverers of health and nutrition information to consumers (1). Forty-eight percentage of consumers polled in the 2000 survey said that they received their health news from television (down from 57% in the 1997 survey); magazines and newspapers follow at 47 and 18%, respectively. Family, friends, books, physicians, the Internet and the radio are also key information sources. The American Dietetic Association survey also examined the value of nutrition information sources. At least 90% of those surveyed said they placed the most value on information from doctors, registered dietitians and nutritionists followed by magazines (87%), nurses (85%), newspapers (82%) and television news (79%).

Consumers are often confused by what they hear in the media about health information. A 1997 report by the National Health Council noted that 68% of survey participants agreed with the statement, “When reporting medical and health news, the media often contradict themselves, so I don’t know what to believe.” (2) Also in 1997, the Food Marketing Institute reported that 8 of 10 consumers think that it is very or somewhat likely “the experts” will have a completely different idea about which foods are healthy and which are not within the next 5 years (3). Research conducted by Princeton Research Associates for Rodale Press highlighted which health stories consumers find the most confusing. Stories about vitamins and supplements top the list followed by nutrition stories (4). Consumers find it difficult to distinguish between public-interest trivia and information that actually warrants behavioral change.

Every two years the IFIC Foundation commissions the Center for Media and Public Affairs to conduct an in-depth qualitative and quantitative analysis of food news to determine the popular media issues that reach consumers (5). In 2001 coverage of diet, health, nutrition and food safety issues was 15% less than two years before. However, there was still a 13% increase in coverage in 2001 compared with 1995. The IFIC Foundation also found that during the three months of coverage analyzed, science experts and researchers were the primary source of information for the media. This indicates that reporters and editors are consulting experts in order to put new findings into the context of scientific literature on a subject. The media’s reliance on scientific experts also underscores the role that each scientist and professional can play in helping to interpret science for the public.

The media’s major obstacle in communicating science is a lack of understanding of the scientific process itself, especially among writers without science backgrounds. Journalists with science backgrounds may better understand that every new study is not necessarily news but rather part of a larger process of discovery and debate. To a general assignment reporter who may not understand this process, each new study may seem to provide newsworthy information and potential headlines. For example, the information presented at this workshop showed how continued research has the potential to affect individuals. However, no single health message will apply to all individuals. Therefore, it is imperative that the emerging and ongoing science discussed at the workshop be translated in a way that ultimately makes it meaningful to the public. Recognizing this need, the IFIC Foundation has worked with science and health communicators to determine how best to provide scientists and experts with an understanding of their critical role in the communications process and a level of comfort in providing context when speaking with journalists.

To address these contextual challenges, the Harvard School of Public Health and the IFIC Foundation convened an advisory group to examine the communications process. The group included scientists from Harvard and Tufts University, medical journal editors, professional interest group and food industry representatives, and practicing journalists. The advisory board was chaired by Timothy Johnson, the ABC News medicine and health editor. The committee was charged with devising practical guidelines for interpreting and reporting science-based information for all players in the communications process.

Early in the deliberations, the advisory group realized that just as there is a food chain, there is a communications chain. On one end is the scientist, who interprets science as it emerges, and at the other end of the chain is the journalist, who is the visible deliverer of the information. Scientists and journalists are linked by a number of other key stakeholders, including journal editors, public information officers and public relations professionals, consumer groups, special interest groups and food industry groups. All of these stakeholders play a critical role in how scientific information reaches the public.

What resulted from this joint Harvard–IFIC Foundation advisory group was a set of questions meant to guide all groups in the communications process: Will your communication enhance public understanding of diet and health? Have you put the study findings into context? Have the findings been peer reviewed? Have you disclosed the important facts about the study? Have you disclosed all key information about the study’s findings? The advisory group paid particular attention to the role of funding sources and agreed that they should be disclosed when reporting a study’s results but that the findings ought to stand on their own merit. In addition to the general guidelines, the advisory group created a checklist of guiding principles for each group in the communications chain, including scientists, journal editors, journalists, industry, and consumer and other interest groups (6).

Johnson summarized the relevance of these guidelines, saying, “These guidelines can only make a difference if they don’t sit on a shelf. Putting these recommendations into practice just might make a difference in the public’s understanding of diet and health. I urge you to read them, share them, remember them and use them. After all, I think what the public wants is for us to be honest with each study as it comes along and try to put it into perspective but keep reminding people that it’s the totality of the evidence as it unfolds that warrants their attention.”

LITERATURE CITED