



HFMA UPDATE

by Graham Keen,
Executive Director

"The man who reads nothing at all is better educated than the man who reads nothing but newspapers" – Thomas Jefferson.

Regular readers of this column will know that all the while we are trying to seek a fair regulatory playing field for our members and helping them to navigate the intricacies of the legislative minefield, we are also keeping a very wary eye on the media and how the products and services of this great industry are portrayed.

Lazy and careless one-sided reporting of the latest 'new' research, usually extremely negative, is what we have come to term as a 'scud' and unfortunately scud-hunting takes up far more of my time than I would care for.

Today has been one such day, when a new scientific report adversely linking cancer prevention with antioxidants, authored by a Nobel prize-winning scientist no less, has been reported in the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Telegraph*. No matter that as an industry we have always maintained that consumers under the care of their doctor, or on some form of medication, should always consult with their doctor before taking supplements, the journalists involved did not report this to provide a more balanced article.

And there's the rub. Sometimes 'balance' is not terribly newsworthy. And as we all know, all rules of balance fly out of the window, particularly when it comes to headlines.

We have had more than our fair share of bad ones, probably hitting an all-time low with the classic 'The toxic truth about vitamin supplements', particularly infuriating when only one of the five

Headline news

substances the article went on to talk about was in fact a vitamin! You may be interested to know that of the other four, one was seaweed (kelp) and another (melatonin) was a substance banned from free sale in the UK! Why does this matter? Well, apart from a desire to see accurate reporting, I'm reliably informed that, on average, five times as many people read the headline as read the body copy of the article in question. All we really want to see is that journalists, when a new piece of research arrives on their desk, actually question what they are seeing rather than simply passing the information on.

The all time 'headline' low has to have been when in the same newspaper (guess who?), on the same day, the front page headline was 'Junk food diet hits a child's IQ', and then inside the paper, within the 'health' section appeared 'How even junk food can provide your daily dose of vitamins'. As I understand it, the newspaper concerned was somewhat embarrassed when we pointed this out to them, and this just served to show that even journalists on the same publication were not actually communicating with each other.

The HFMA's new 'In the News' service introduced late last year has proved a hit with our members, and thankfully we are reporting fewer incidences of journalists writing one-sided stories. Often, this can be down to what that news is competing with on any given day, or even the day of the week (I'm thinking of re-naming Friday as 'Scud-day'!). But we also believe



this is due, in part, to the health journalist outreach programme we initiated via our PR company, Pegasus, around 18 months ago.

In a systematic way we are meeting with health journalists to raise their awareness of our market, their knowledge of our products, familiarity with the HFMA etc, and to make sure that we are now on their radar should they have any questions or a need for an industry response. We also make them aware of the HFMA's Expert Panel of notable industry experts, which includes Dr Adam Carey and Patrick Holford. There have been countless times that they, and we, have been grateful for the specialist input of the likes of Dr Marilyn Glenville, who always speaks so eloquently and powerfully on behalf of the natural health industry.

This apparent reduction in scud-prevalence is also in part down to our increased efforts to have early warning mechanisms in place. If we can get an early indication of what

is coming we can react and respond, and perhaps even minimise the negative impact, as was the case on more than one occasion in 2012. And the more we can be successful in doing this, the more time we can devote to what we all really want, which is promoting positive news for our industry. We need more headlines like this one, from the *Daily Mail* in October last year, 'Taking a daily multivitamin pill can lower the risk of cancer' – particularly ironic given today's report in the same paper!

I sincerely hope I begin 2014 by telling you that sanity has prevailed and that our industry received its fair share of positive publicity in 2013, but I'm certainly not going to put my money on it. Instead, I will continue to try to seek gradual change and improvement and will leave you with another quotation that seemed particularly apposite: **"Harmony seldom makes a headline" – Silas Bent**

If you want to know more, or would like to join the HFMA or learn more about our activities, please contact me at graham@hfma.co.uk.

HFMA membership is vital to ensure that your company keeps abreast of the fast-changing regulatory environment. The HFMA is the UK's best source of information and most effective defender of our industry's interests. To help the HFMA defend your business at this most critical time contact hfma@hfma.co.uk or call 020 8481 7100.

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The Voice of the Natural Health Industry