



HFMA UPDATE

by Graham Keen,
Executive Director

If I had to sum up in just a few words why this great industry exists, and why we have such an important role to play, it would be these six words, that we are 'helping a nation to be healthier'.

And this message is becoming increasingly powerful as I attend meetings in Westminster and Brussels, meeting Parliamentarians who can really appreciate that if we can do anything to help reduce the pressure on the national healthcare system, then this is to be applauded.

Every time we hear something like the recent announcement by the Chief Medical Officer in the UK, Professor Dame Sally Davies, that we need to find ways to increase supplementation of infants and children with vitamin D to ward off the return of rickets to this country, this is further vindication of what we do. In the United States, they figured out some time back that there were massive savings to be made to the cost of the US healthcare system simply by encouraging the consumption of a few key food supplements.

And underpinning what we do is a safety record that would be the envy of other sectors in the food and pharma industries, with recent new data from the Food Standards Agency confirming that, on average, there have been fewer than five reported incidents relating to food supplements per year over the last 10 years, these being mostly mild and gastrointestinal in nature. This means that we have a safety record that stands up to scrutiny by our detractors, and all of this set against the backdrop of the fact that our industry operates in one of the toughest regulatory environments in the world.

The really good news is that, in spite of the constant barrage of negative publicity in the national media, the number of people consuming our products continues to rise. At the HFMA, we just completed

Helping a nation to be healthier



our latest Health of the Nation survey of 10,000 adults and one key statistic that I can reveal here is that the number of adults taking food supplements has risen by nine per cent over the last two years. We now know that 55 per cent of the adult population – that's around 28 million people – are taking food supplements.

One of those very popular food supplements is folic acid, which plays a vital role in preventing neural tube defects, which in turn results in the reduced incidence of spina bifida in the unborn child. At the HFMA, we are very happy to have played such a key role in the application for a health claim for folic acid, which, following the European Food Safety Authority's approval, is now working its way in rapid time through the adoption process in Brussels.

Following further discussion at the Standing Committee Meeting in December, the draft Regulation for the new claim was revised, at the suggestion of the dossier's author, HFMA Scientific Adviser Dr Michele Sadler, to bring the wording for the claim in line with the other authorised disease risk reduction claims. The new proposed wording for the claim is: "Supplemental folic acid intake increases maternal folate status, Low maternal folate status is a risk factor in the development of neural tube defects."

The claim has been notified to the World Trade Organization and, subject to a positive vote at the Standing Committee mid-year and subsequent approval by the European Parliament, it should be adopted towards the end of the year.

It will then enter into force a month after it is adopted.

In previous articles, I have spoken of the critical threat to the food supplement status of glucosamine in the form of an upcoming Judicial Review, which will decide whether to uphold the complaint of a pharmaceutical company and determine glucosamine to be a medicine, thereby creating a very worrying precedent for the future of other food supplements that have licensed equivalent products. You will know that the MHRA here in the UK, against whom the action is being brought, is vigorously defending the current status quo, and the HFMA stands alone in supporting them in this action, into which we have very actively 'intervened' via our very professional lawyers at Covington & Burling.

We now know that the case will be heard on May 1 and 2 at the High Court in London, after which there is likely to be a period of reflection before the judgement is handed down. You should be under no illusion, the outcome of this action is vital to the future of this industry, and in the years to come we will look back to this action as a pivotal moment in this industry's development.

In the meantime we will all meet up once again at our annual trade show, at Olympia for the last time for the foreseeable future. In 2015, we will all move to the ExCeL arena, and we must wish the N&OPE team the very best of luck with the move. The show is our shop window to the world, and an opportunity to meet old friends and make new ones. The

HFMA's annual meeting will be held during the show, and we'll look forward to welcoming our members to the meeting.

I recently attended the annual meeting of the Health Food Institute, at which HFMA Vice President, Penny Viner, gave this year's Jack Noah Memorial Lecture. Needless to say, as I would have expected, it was very well received by all present. In typically clear and coherent style, Penny's excellent presentation 'Thoughts on the future for herbal and homoeopathic medicines and botanical food supplements' was a thought-provoking, not to say sobering, insight into the challenges of marketing herbal and botanical products in the future. When the Under Secretary of State for Health, Daniel Poulter MP, recently announced the formation of a new group, the Herbal Medicines and Practitioners Working Group, it was no surprise that Penny should be invited by him to join this group.

At the HFI meeting, there were a number of highlights during the day, the opportunity to see a happy and healthy Ray Hill, to see Richard Austin very deservedly pick up the main award of the day, and former HFMA chair Martin Last equally deservedly become a Fellow of the Institute. But best of all to see Graeme Gunn on great form after his difficult year of ill health and another great old friend, Brian Halls, back amongst us after his very challenging medical procedures over the Christmas and New Year period. When I think my work is challenging and I'm struggling to make progress, I only have to look at these guys to bring things back into perspective!

To help us in our efforts to protect this industry and benefit from the gold-standard advice we provide, join the HFMA at the earliest opportunity. To 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.

