



## HFMA UPDATE

by Graham Keen,  
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# Seeking positives from adversity

**A**s I write this, we are just completing our second month of lockdown, with little sign of dramatic changes in strategy to defeat the Coronavirus any time soon. But thinking appears to have shifted quite understandably to finding the balance between defeating the virus and getting our economy moving again.

The food and drink industry's readiness to emerge from lockdown is now the main theme of the twice-weekly calls I'm taking part in of the UK Food & Drink Industry COVID-19 Roundtable, and a tremendous amount of amazing work is being undertaken behind the scenes on this front. Workplace absenteeism in our industry resulting from COVID-19 is continuing to decline; in some instances, it is now below five per cent, and a lot of good thinking is going into how to ensure a safe working environment for returning workers. This group has been developing a Discussion Document on Recovery Strategy under the title of 'Building a Path to Recovery', and the industry is lobbying extensively for the support it needs to return the sector to its previous strengths.

Our industry, i.e. the health food retailers and those companies that supply them, has been able to continue trading throughout the lockdown – not without massive challenges – and that has been very heartwarming to see. Our member companies and all of the retailers that stayed open for business deserve a huge amount of credit. And it is no small irony that amongst all of the darkness and difficulties, it would appear that there has been a very positive, potentially permanent, shift in thinking amongst some regulators and officials, and certainly the public at large, to see our products for what they are – a vital building block in



the maintenance of a healthy diet and lifestyle.

This has been helped by some very positive media coverage for our products and the role they can play, and also some new academic research papers and activity that has highlighted the importance of supplementation in the current crisis. The almost unprecedented level of recent positive media coverage is a reflection of this. In our daily 'In the News' bulletins to HFMA members in the month of April, we reported on no less than 370 media stories, of which 273 were 'positive' and only five 'negative'. This has included extensive reporting of the Public Health England decision to re-issue its advice on vitamin D supplementation to all people, with an emphasis on more time being spent inside, as opposed to the autumn and winter months. At the HFMA, our proactive networking enabled us to prepare a news release ready for when the new PHE vitamin D guidance first reached the press, ensuring that HFMA's statement was dynamic as soon as the story hit.

As I have mentioned earlier in this article, from academia, we have seen recent positive developments, in particular relating to the positive benefits from vitamin D supplementation. One of these was a new scientific paper entitled 'Optimal Nutritional Status for a Well-Functioning Immune System

is an Important Factor to Protect against Viral Infections' by Prof Philip Calder of Southampton University, and others, which concluded that supplementation with vitamins D and C played an important role in maintaining a healthy immune system. From that study, the following is particularly worth noting:

*"Against this background the following conclusions are made: (1) supplementation with the above micronutrients and omega-3 fatty acids is a safe, effective, and low-cost strategy to help support optimal immune function; (2) supplementation above the Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA), but within recommended upper safety limits, for specific nutrients such as vitamins C and D is warranted; and (3) public health officials are encouraged to include nutritional strategies in their recommendations to improve public health."*

The paper argues that inadequate intake of micronutrients (vitamins A, B6, B12, C, D, E, folate, zinc, iron, selenium and copper), plus omega 3 acids (EPA and DHA) – all of which are important for the immune system – are widespread globally, leading to reduced resistance to infections and increase in disease burden. Public health officials are encouraged to consider nutritional strategies in their recommendations to improve public health, and this positive paper is set in the context of COVID-19 and other respiratory infections and the co-authors are from the Netherlands, New Zealand and the USA. It will be interesting to see what response it receives by public health officials and other academics.

At around the same time, we also learned that Irish academics were calling for recommendations about vitamin D supplementation in the

face of the COVID-19 epidemic, via an interesting editorial entitled 'Low population mortality from COVID-19 in countries south of latitude 35 degrees North supports vitamin D as a factor determining severity'. The authors correlate mortality from COVID-19 with latitude and argue that countries that lie below 35 degrees north have relative low mortality, compared with those above this latitude and in which there is insufficient sunlight in winter to retain adequate vitamin D status. They call for research to investigate whether there may be a correlation between vitamin D status and severity of COVID-19 disease, and the hypothesis is that vitamin D would suppress the inflammatory cytokine response and protect against subsequent acute respiratory distress syndrome, a common cause of mortality in COVID-19. The authors call for governments to strengthen recommendations for vitamin D intake and supplementation, particularly under lockdown, as a substantial proportion of populations in the Northern Hemisphere will be vitamin D deficient, and supplementation with effective intakes of vitamin D is safe.

It is my fervent hope that we can collectively emerge from this current health crisis in sufficient good shape to build upon the challenges we currently face. If we can, then I have no doubt that we will have a receptive and ready audience for our wonderful products! **hfb**

**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](mailto: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](mailto:hfma@hfma.co.uk) or call 020 8481 7100.**

