

Is the continued growth of the natural health industry in danger of a potential major decline?

Readers will be well familiar with health, fitness and weight loss TV programmes, healthy lifestyle apps and celebrity blogs with endorsements encompassing advice/recommendations on mind body, spirit. In some ways it might seem that this is a new modern outlook, the glossy magazines and the attractive media advocates for health and wellness are presented as selling something innovative. While what is being sold might be brightly packaged and the accompanying marketing is tailored to have impact on the largest numbers, what is in the package is by no means new.

Over the last half century and beyond, manufacturers, suppliers and retailers of natural health products have not only provided an ever-expanding range of health and wellness products to the market but have invested significant resources in delivering educational tools to encourage and nurture consumer knowledge about nutrition and health. The continued growth of the natural health industry is a tangible indicator that years of supply and tuition has culminated in a savvy consumer interested in maintaining their own health. The demand for supplements as a means to prevent illness and stay healthy has been positive and rewarding for our sector however should we now be asking, has this golden era started on a potential major decline?

Do readers appreciate that it is problematic for manufacturers to continue to provide the consumer with *the raison d'être* for the products on the market? The European Food Safety Authority's (EFSA) nutrition and health claims regulation (NHCR) provides one of the clearest examples of increased stringency inhibiting producers to demonstrate the health benefits of their products. In addition, the slowness at EU level on the authorisation of health claims for botanical food supplements has led to these products being supplied without any claims or with on-hold claims that have not been appropriately scientifically assessed. This is not a good risk management practice, as neither option allows the consumer to be provided with the information they need for the safe and effective use of the products.

As an industry sector, we have continued to protest against being denied the opportunity to communicate honestly, accurately and meaningfully with our consumers about the actual or potential value of our products. Having questionable scientific limitations imposed preventing our advertising *the raison d'être* for our products leaves the consumer in limbo and threatens the viability of our natural health sector. This is particularly important when the target consumers are specifically interested in the actual or potential health benefits associated with the products.

Readers will appreciate that the legitimate food supplement sector has an excellent safety record, the requirements of food law compliance together with industry manufacturing/distribution procedures ensures food safety on the market. However, the media coverage on the consequences of consumers buying unfamiliar products of unknown origin does from time to time cause damage to the responsible market.

Another inhibitor to our national market placement, is the situation whereby a number of plants freely available for sale as food supplements in other member states are prohibited for sale in Ireland because of policies adopted by our national regulators. Consequently this questionable risk management practice to restrict the availability of products that are deemed safe for human consumption as food in other Member States, drives consumers to access these products through the internet, where a wide variety of illegal and potentially unsafe products are continuously being offered for sale into Ireland. As mentioned, this indeed causes damage to the legitimate market.

A further worry for our industry sector is the fact that our national regulators advocate supplementation dosage intakes well below those levels that are actually needed for optimal health. The awaited Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) guidance document on USLs for Vitamins and Minerals in Ireland has yet to be placed in the public domain. Will industry be surprised by the FSAI recommendations? Will the adage that "past performance is not indicative of future results" ring true....only time will tell.

As an industry we can be proud of the headway gained in the natural health market over the years, it was no easy task educating our consumers on health maintenance and illness prevention and in

that respect, much has been achieved. That said, we must now strive to be vigilant and alert to the stealth of inhibitors that can slowly but consistently mitigate our gains.