

IADSA participation at the 21st International Congress of Nutrition (ICN)
October 15 - 20, 2017
Buenos Aires, Argentina

A Conference Report

The [ICN](#) is organized by the International Union of Nutritional Sciences ([IUNS](#)), an international consortium comprised of national nutrition societies or comparable national organizations. This year's event attracted about 3000 delegates. There were approximately 25 nutrition industry companies exhibiting and 20 national nutrition societies and NGOs present. The 2021 and 2025 ICN will be held in Tokyo, Japan and Paris, France, respectively.

Session Summary

The IADSA sponsored and organized session, *Is there a role for dietary food supplements in nutrition and health promotion?* was held 5 – 7pm on Tuesday, October 17. Approximately 80 people attended.

Welcome from the session Chair: Framing the issue

- In her presentation, Dr. Johanna Dwyer, Tufts University School of Medicine, outlined the well-established functions of dietary supplements. These include filling nutrient gaps and reducing the risk of certain chronic diseases. She also highlighted some of the limitations with supplements, including cost, lack of data in some at-risk populations and lack of benefit in nutrient-replete populations. Dr. Dwyer also raised a series of questions, such as whether there is a need for more harmonized regulations globally, how to determine if non-nutrient bioactives in supplements are safe and efficacious, and how to foster greater investment in supplement research.

From challenges of the past to opportunities of the future: Evolution of the field of nutrition

- In his presentation, Dr. Andrew Shao summarized how nutrition science has evolved in parallel with public health needs. As the world has transitioned over the past century from dealing with communicable disease and malnutrition to non-communicable disease and conditions of excess, nutrition's focus has shifted from curing/preventing overt and widespread nutrient deficiency, to addressing chronic disease, to health promotion. The approach to nutrition research has also evolved from one that relied on a reductionist approach, focusing exclusively on the efficacy of single molecules, to a more holistic approach, incorporating aspects of the environment, behavior and other elements that impact food choice. The research agenda has appropriately shifted to one that is more ecological, emphasizing dietary patterns over specific nutrients in isolation. The question posed by Dr. Shao to the audience was, we know supplements are part of this dietary landscape, the question is, what role do they have?

Dietary/food supplements in health promotion: Illustrations of the benefits and risks of research

- Dr. Jeffrey Blumberg from the Tufts University Friedman School of Nutrition Science & Policy focused on how research on supplements has erred, due in part to an overreliance on randomized controlled trials (RCT). Using specific examples, Dr. Blumberg summarized how drug-like RCTs involving supplemental nutrients have been poorly designed and/or misinterpreted. While RCTs overall suffer from a host of

limitations, such as lack of real life conditions, attrition, compliance and lack of generalizability, they do play a key role in research, provided they are designed properly. Dr. Blumberg stressed that the most critical element for the appropriate design of RCTs for supplemental nutrients is ensuring the proper questions are being asked.

Regulation of dietary/food supplements: A global overview

- Simon Pettman provided an introduction to IADSA, followed by a broad overview of the global situation with supplement regulations. Although supplements are referred to by different names, the meaning is fairly common and consistent worldwide. Also, while perceptions might be that supplements are un- or under-regulated, there are substantial regulations covering supplements in most markets around the world. Mr. Pettman summarized the five major global trends with supplement regulation, including harmonization in key regions, evolution from registration to notification systems for market entry, partnering with the private sector to evolve regulations, addressing health claims and botanicals in supplements. There are key issues to consider for evolving regulations. These include whether they are fit for purpose, whether the government has the capacity and resources to establish and enforce regulations, and the fact that depending on the circumstances, regulation can be a stimulus or obstacle for investments in scientific research.

Panel Discussion

- For the discussion, each of the two additional panelists provided comments. Professor Silvia Franciscato Cozzolino from the University of Sao Paulo stressed the need to understand a population's nutritional status, rather than relying on nutrient intake surveys (which are notoriously inaccurate), to determine true gaps that might be filled with dietary supplements.
- Professor Ricardo Uauy from the University of London, stressed the need for adequate data to be accrued on supplements to properly support claims. He used omega-3 fatty acids to illustrate an example of where there has been sufficient science to support claims.

Recommendations

Going forward, it is recommended that IADSA consider carefully the strategic relevance and importance of sponsorship of and/or active participation in nutrition/scientific congresses. This participation should connect with a broader objective of the organization. For example, there may be a need for IADSA to connect with and influence nutrition societies and related NGOs and their respective memberships. The scientists and researchers who are members of these organizations also function as regulators or serve on advisory boards/committees which advise governments on regulation. Further, many nutrition societies and related NGOs develop position statements, papers, publications and communications around issues of public health interest, including potentially the benefits (and risks) of supplements.