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Intelligence

Is the seafood story that complicated?

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By Roy D. Palmer, FAICD

Keep it simple, so the message is not lost on its journey to consumers



Eating fish is part of a heart-healthy diet, and many types are good sources of important fatty acids.

It is summer in the Northern Hemisphere – the ideal time to be promoting and selling seafood. There is much to be happy about, yet the story reaching some consumers is being complicated and made negative.

FDA mercury update: missed opportunity

It was announced that the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) updated its advice for pregnant women on the appropriate levels of mercury in seafood. This is a positive story, because finally the government has awakened to the fact that its mercury advisory has done more damage than good. It was ill-advised and focused on the risks instead of the overwhelming benefits of eating seafood.

FDA Commissioner Margaret Hamburg reportedly said the new advice will not require mercury labels on seafood packages. What a strong and positive message. Finally, after a long-awaited study that many insiders said was held up due to internal politics rather than any sound scientific advice, women – especially those of a child-bearing age – will be able to better understand what to eat when they're pregnant.

"It's an advisory, not an effort to mandate labeling," Hamburg was reported as saying. Eating fish is part of a heart-healthy diet, and many types are good sources of omega-3 fatty acids that are important for brain development. This is genuinely a great seafood story, right?

But no... Somehow the truth was coming out from the highest level, based on years of study and promoted by the commissioner, yet who got most of the story? The Center for Science in the Public Interest, a consumer advocacy organization that for years has been running disinformation about seafood for some reason and wants mandatory labeling.

So instead of being a positive story, this has taken a major turn and is now highlighting the dangers of accumulating mercury from eating seafood. No facts, no science, but lots of opinion and innuendo.

The article ended on the topic of genetically modified foods (let us confuse consumers more), where Commissioner Hamburg reiterated her support for voluntary labels and said a "considerable amount of scientific study does not suggest the kinds of public health concerns that some consumers have worried about." Additionally, Hamburg said she did not believe FDA should have to do a mandatory safety review of all engineered foods, highlighting that FDA now reviews the safety of genetically modified animals, but has a voluntary review for companies that want to sell modified crops for consumption.

What was a simple positive story became a complicated piece leaving questions to anyone reading it. What a shame, what a missed opportunity.

Chronic diseases, prevention

In the United States, 75 percent of the health care dollars goes to treatment of chronic diseases. These persistent conditions – the nation's leading causes of death and disability – leave in their wake deaths that could have been prevented, lifelong disability, compromised quality of life and burgeoning health care costs. The situation is no different in Australia or in Europe, and regrettably the Western ways of processing and marketing food to the masses have now filtered through to Asia and elsewhere, where they will likely increase chronic disease in the future.

In India, the Centre for Chronic Disease Control reports: "The burden of chronic diseases has reached epidemic proportion in India along with the penitence of preternatural diseases. It is now experiencing a polarized and protracted double burden of disease. India, the second most populous country, has the highest number of diabetics in the world, and annual coronary deaths are expected to reach 2 million by 2010. At the present stage of India's health transition, chronic diseases contribute to an estimated 53 percent of deaths and 44 percent of disability-adjusted life years lost. Cardiovascular diseases and diabetes are highly prevalent in urban areas."

Healthcare and nutrition

Chronic diseases can be helped enormously by simple nutrition. Why are we not promoting good nutrition at all levels of healthcare? Pills and drugs are not necessarily the solution – education on good nutrition (incorporating fish and seafood) would have much greater impact. We fail to deliver on preventative measures, which must be the most cost-effective.

Lahsen Ababouch, chief of Fish Utilization and Marketing at the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in Rome, said a few months ago at a conference in Mexico: "Seafood harvested from aquaculture is a complete nutrient package, being the major source of animal proteins and micronutrients for many coastal populations, and a renewable and sustainable source of polyunsaturated fatty acids for optimal brain development and the prevention of coronary heart disease.

"Additionally, it is a unique and complete source of micronutrients and an important source of vitamins generally scarce in rural diets. These are essential benefits which families should consume weekly to ensure a happy, healthy life and comply with dietary guidelines."

Seafood, food security, nutrition

FAO's Committee on World Food Security High Level Panel of Experts recently promoted its paper titled "Report on Sustainable Fisheries and Aquaculture for Food Security and Nutrition." The report, which highlights that fish have received little attention in food security and nutrition strategies, covers the facts and makes recommendations.

Following are a few of those points. The more we promote them, the more chance we have of them being adopted:

- Fish deserves a central position in food security and nutrition strategies. This covers four issues highlighting the need to promote small-scale production and nutrition education: tackling micronutrient deficiencies, especially among children and women; strengthening international assistance and cooperation to build capacity in food security and nutrition; eliminating harmful subsidies that encourage overfishing; and redirecting that funding toward public-good investments that support infrastructure and capacity development to improve the livelihoods and economic possibilities in food security and nutrition. Additionally, states, national and international research institutes, and development agencies should conduct regular studies to better understand pathways between fish, gender and nutritional standards, and review fisheries' discard practices to ensure a sustainable program.
- Threats and risks for world fisheries include the effects of climate change.
- Opportunities and challenges in aquaculture cover several areas. National and international research organizations funded by governments and other agencies should aim to enhance sustainability and productivity outcomes, highlighting areas such as food safety, health control, improved feed stocks that do not compete with human foods, domestication and genetic improvement, integration models and improved linkages with the food chain, with due consideration given to ecosystem integrity. States and other private and public stakeholders and international actors should take actions to reduce fishmeal and fish oil use in feed and encourage the promotion of low-trophic-level fish (herbivores and omnivores) and put in place collaborations to encourage the sharing of learning experiences in aquaculture.
- Other important topics include small-scale versus large-scale operations, trade and markets, social protection and labor rights, gender equity, and governance.

Perspectives

Let us all find the way to continue to promote the fantastic products that we are producing through aquaculture. We have a renewable resource that we can evidence is farmed responsibly. Let us keep the stories simple, so the message is not lost on its journey to consumers.

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Author



ROY D. PALMER, FAICD

GILLS
2312/80 Clarendon Street
Southbank Victoria 3006 Australia
www.gillseafood.com

roydpalmer@gmail.com (<mailto:roydpalmer@gmail.com>).

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