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By Ben Bouckley, 18-Jan-2012

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Reflecting on a successful last year in research terms, US Dairy Research Institute (DRI) president Gregory Miller told Dairy Reporter.com about the key challenges facing the industry in 2012.



Asked how he would respond to those consumers who believed that dairy products added cholesterol and fat to the diet, and also gave rise to allergy concerns, Miller (pictured) said:

"I think the image of dairy products is that they are healthy nutrient rich foods that can be part of a healthy diet. But some activist groups have led the charge to put out what I would say is misinformation on dairy products.

"But total US dairy consumption has increased over the last few years. We're at about 1.7 servings consumed per person per day in the US right now."

Pushing beyond calcium

Consumers worldwide made a connection between dairy products, calcium content and bone health, but did Miller agree more needed to be done to raise awareness of other benefits?

"I think the dairy industry has done a really good job globally at promoting the benefits of calcium in our diets. We need to do a better job talking about the total nutrient package dairy delivers," he said.

"There's calcium plus eight other essential nutrients that dairy is considered a good source of. So the dairy industry has to help consumers really understand that it's a nutrient rich food, and the cost of dairy relative to other nutrient sources is also very good.

"You're getting great nutritional quality at a pretty low cost, and a lot of health benefits. And they're going to be benefits to consumers in healthcare arena too. Because adequate consumption of dairy can reduce the number of chronic diseases and the associated healthcare costs."

One such disease is Type 2 diabetes: *"Earlier this year the CDC [Centers for Disease Control] sounded the alarm on Type 2 diabetes, being the next major epidemic that's going to hit on a global basis. This naturally relates to the obesity epidemic that's already out there,"* said Miller.

Dietary Guidelines for Americans

Discussing a paper by Tong et al. (2011), Miller said it suggested that dairy was not part of the problem relating to increased Type 2 diabetes risk, but could instead be part of the solution, since higher dairy consumers were at lower risk of developing the illness.

After a [systematic review of seven prospective studies](#), the researchers found that, for every additional dairy serving consumed daily, the risk of developing Type 2 diabetes fell by 6%.

Miller said exciting recent research-related events included the release of the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans last January, which recognised that milk and milk product consumption reduced risk of cardiovascular disease (CVD), Type 2 diabetes and lowered blood pressure.

Miller said: *"This was huge recognition from the scientific community, regulatory agencies that dairy foods should be consumed more rather than less to reduce your risk of heart disease. I think this was a paradigm shift in thinking within the scientific community around dairy foods.*

"Also, recognition that milk fat not equal to saturated fat in terms of its potential impact on blood cholesterol and subsequent risk of heart disease. In the scientific community now, there's a recognition that milk fat is not linked to CVD. Regardless of its milk fat content, dairy reduces your risk of heart disease.

Miller added: *"They're still recommending low fat and fat-free because of the caloric density issue, and what we need to do as researchers is look at benefits of milk fat consumption – bioactive components like Conjugated linoleic Acids (CLAs) – their potential impact on heart disease and cancer reduction, and other bioactive lipids.*

"We need to show that milk fat consumption does have benefits, move health professionals to say that 'some traditional whole milk products can be part of a total diet, and it's about the total diet over time'."

2012 research directions

Asked about research directions in 2012, Miller said: *"I think you'll continue to see more research around the benefits of dairy consumption in reducing risk of type 2 diabetes and issues relating to metabolic syndrome.*

"If you have high triglycerides [fats found in the blood] abdominal obesity, high blood pressure, you're at greater risk of heart disease, and we need to show that greater dairy consumption reduces risk of metabolic syndrome.

He added: *"I also think you'll see a greater focus on milk fat, and better communication on fact that it is neutral to beneficial in terms of heart disease risk. That's really important, because for our industry you can't really make a good tasting low-fat cheese, for instance."*

2011 research also unearthed applications for dairy co-products such as whey, and Miller hailed work suggesting that whey permeates could be used to replace salt as a "serendipitous discovery".

He said: *"We were doing research to use whey permeates as additional compounds in making biscuits. When we used the permeates in products they tasted too salty. So we had to reduce salt levels, and this triggered the idea of using this as a salt replacer.*

"Subsequent research has shown that these permeates can be used in soups, biscuits, bread products, and we're really excited about that. Taking what could be seen as a byproduct, and turning it into a value-added product that the industry will be able to make some money from."