Food Fax®

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# Functional Foods: Ten Years' Hence Part 1 of 4 March 2005

## In the beginning....

The concept of Functional Foods first took hold in the Western World between 1993 and 1995. Interest, attention and excitement grew rapidly as word circulated about a new group of food products legislated in Japan in 1992 called FOSHU, or, Foods of Specified Health Use. The regulated FOSHU designation – the only one of its kind in the world to date – legitimizes the fact that foods containing particular levels of active, beneficial ingredients, consumed in predetermined doses, can intervene to decrease the risk of, or treat, disease.

Food industry stakeholders worldwide enviously wanted similar legislation passed in their respective countries. Conferences, seminars, workshops, research studies and lobby efforts prevailed, reaching a peak in 1998, and tapering off in recent years to a level typical of any niche market.

## Nomenclature Chaos

Several names emerged – most withered – for a term to accurately portray 'a food or food ingredient that has health or medical benefits, including the prevention and treatment of disease'. A 1995 Agriculture and Agri-food Canada study identified the following terms in use at that time:

*functional foods, designer foods, medical foods, medicinal foods, pharmafoods, phytochemicals, nutri-foods, engineered foods, pharma-nutrients, clinical foods, and parnuts, the latter reflecting 'foods of particular nutritional uses'.*

Functional Foods was found to be the most commonly used term at that time. Among the other terms revealed by the study, it remains the one most commonly used today. Current research indicates that the term has no recognition among consumers, and has currency only among stakeholders in industry, academia and government, and some health professionals.

## Root of the Functional Food Name

The term emerged when scientists observed that some common foods could significantly alter major bodily functions. It was proven and accepted that oatmeal, consumed as part of a healthy diet and in the correct proportions, could consistently reduce serum cholesterol levels.

The name originally given to these foods by researchers – Physiologically Functional Foods – became shortened to Functional Foods.

Until this discovery, the notion that food could prevent or treat a health-threatening physiological process had been the sole domain of pharmaceuticals and completely outside the discipline of nutrition. Today it is an important part of every university-level nutrition curriculum.

## Straddling the Food-Drug Interface

Is it a food or a drug? That oatmeal alters a body process suggests it is a drug; that it is consumed as part of a dietary plan, served in a bowl with milk and sugar, suggests it is a food.

While this debate continues in several circles, indications are that time, continuous research, better science, advanced technology and regulatory reform have differentiated Functional Foods from these two polars and provided a distinct space and place for their development and regulation.

The next Food Fax will review the Food-Drug Interface in more detail. In the interim, consult the websites shown below. FF

## Some Web sites

http://europe.ilsi.org/publications/pubslist.cfm?publicationid=419