Preface

The phrase “functional foods” was known only to very few specialists in 1991, when our founding members had the foresight to give this name to the Functional Foods for Health (FFH) Program. Ten years later many Americans recognize the phrase “functional foods” as well as the related word “neutraceuticals”. Words that describe the function of foods (such as phytoestrogens or antioxidants) are now routinely found in the popular press. The FFH Program has been a world leader in popularizing the idea that there are health benefits in food that go beyond basic nutrition. However, the idea is not new. In fact, about 2500 years ago Hippocrates taught that “your food shall be your remedy”.

The rapid growth of the functional foods and nutritional supplement industries and the popularization of alternative medicine reveal that there is a disturbing lack of knowledge in basic questions such as: What are the active constituents of foods? Can the presumed active constituents substitute for the whole food? Is genetic modification a vital alternative for improving taste, making crops resistant to disease and providing inexpensive food to the world’s poorest nations? What are the interactions between botanical supplements and drugs? What are the optimal and safe concentrations of active constituents? The increased public interest in the potential health benefits of foods and their constituents made apparent that the experts disagree in many of these basic issues. The disagreements are not only due to lack of scientific data, but also to reasons unrelated to science. For example, the emotional issue of “natural versus genetically modified crops” has economic impact, political consequences, raises ethical dilemmas, and challenges religious beliefs. On the other hand, the interaction between drugs and botanicals is strictly a scientific question. However, the large number of drugs and supplements generate many possible interactions that require concerted efforts to decipher. The National Center of Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) realized the impact and the complexity of these issues and encourages (through special funds) research in this field. The identification of optimal but safe concentrations of active food constituents is also a very complex scientific question that must be addressed by coordinated research.

The contents of this special supplement contain peer-reviewed publications from several speakers at the eleventh annual conference (“Controversies in Functional Foods”) of the University of Illinois’ Functional Foods for Health Program, held in Chicago, IL, in June of 2001. Original articles from other FFH faculty members are included as well. The contributions to this publication of *Pharmaceutical Biology* reflect one of the goals of the FFH-sponsored annual conferences, which is to provide a forum for the dissemination of information about and scholarly discussion of the most recent and relevant scientific issues confronting the functional foods industry. The manuscripts published in this supplement represent insights from academic and industry scientists that address some of the questions poised above, and that will, we hope, contribute to the body of sound, science-based knowledge needed for the development of safe and efficacious functional foods and products containing bioactive components.

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