

MISLEADING HEALTH CLAIM: WHERE DO WE STAND?

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It is common for anxious parents to present various queries regarding the growth and development of their children to practitioners. As it is common knowledge that children have a higher requirement of various nutrients during the periods of rapid growth and development, a genuine concern of parents is whether their children are getting sufficient nutrients in their diet.^[1] To add to this concern, there are numerous commercial advertisements from food supplement, both in print and electronic media, which claim that supplementation with their product, can lead to miraculous improvements in their child's physical and mental performance and growth.

It is very important for practitioners to quell the doubts of parents. After ensuring that there is no nutritional deficiency, it is necessary that an honest attempt is made to answer these queries. Representatives from such commercial companies can also influence the view of the practitioner.^[2] It is necessary to keep in mind that these supplements can also lead to various problems. The potentially harmful effects of these food products lead to lower breast feeding rates. The high content of sodium and sugar in processed food is also responsible for overweight, obesity and hypertension.^[3,4]

There have been several instances in recent past where these commercials have been challenged in legal forums as there is no scientific basis to the claims made by these companies or such claims have not been validated by scientifically sound studies. Recently, there has been a trend that nutritional supplement companies produce studies, published in journals of repute, which validate their claims. It is normal for a layman to be trapped by such claims. Therefore it becomes the duty of practitioner to assess the validity of such studies, with regard to sample size, profile of participants and significance of results obtained. Some of such studies have invited criticism from experts as these were conducted in low to middle income family children and result were generalized to all children. Potential conflict of interests by authors of such studies should also be kept in

mind.^[5,6]

Most of the developed countries have government bodies which monitor and regulate the advertisements by pharmaceutical and food companies to ensure that there are no misleading ad campaigns. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in United States (US) regulates food supplement under Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act (DSHEA) of 1994.^[7] Federal Trade Commission (FTC) of US also regulated the food supplements advertisement in print and electronic media. Manufacturers have to produce all information related to their claim before advertisement to FTC. European Union Article 16 regulates advertisement of food products and ensures that no misleading claim should be done by manufacturers.^[8]

In India, Food Standards and Safety Authority of India (FSSAI) were established in 2006. FSSAI is a statutory body which has been created for laying down science based standards for articles of food and to regulate their manufacture, storage, distribution, sale and import to ensure availability of safe and wholesome food for human consumption. Article 23 and 24 of FSS act 2006, help in dealing with misleading health claim by food supplements manufacturer. However multinational companies openly flout rules in India in spite of regulatory mechanisms. FSSAI has also filed several litigations against such misleading advertisements.^[9]

We as practitioners have great responsibilities to guide parents not only about misleading health claim but also the deleterious effects of food supplements/products. Professional bodies like Indian Medical Association (IMA) and Indian Academy of Pediatrics (IAP) should take lead and work in collaboration with Government of India so that misleading health claims can be stopped in our country. There is a need to make stringent law by government so that strict actions against any company flouting the rules can be taken.

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