

Foreword

Increasing knowledge of the relationship between diet and health leads to new insights into the effects of food ingredients on physiological functions and health. These insights generate interest among scientists, health care providers and consumers, and in turn stimulate the food industry to match consumers' desire for short- and long-term health benefits through food products that promote health and well-being and reduce the risk of chronic diseases. These foods are called functional foods. The term functional food emerged about a decade ago in a number of countries, e.g. Japan and the United States, and was stimulated and supported by research on the physiological effects of food components and their consequent health benefits.

Despite the absence of a universally accepted definition for functional foods, there is growing general agreement that some foods and beverages have beneficial effects beyond normal nutrition. Functional foods have a future. However, the success of functional foods among consumers will depend on their interest and confidence in these products and will require the accurate communication of their health benefits as well as a favourable and

transparent regulatory framework for approval of the new products and their associated health claims.

In 1995, the International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI) took the initiative in organising the first international symposium on functional foods, East–West Perspectives on Functional Foods, held in Singapore. The 2001 ILSI symposium discussed in this supplement, Functional Foods: Scientific and Global Perspectives, built on this by reviewing the current global status of functional foods and the scientific basis for biomarkers related to the enhancement of function and the reduction of disease risk. The symposium, which took place in Paris, also discussed the issues of human genetic variability and the safety of functional foods, as well as communication requirements from the scientific, consumer and regulatory points of view. Finally, the conference provided a future outlook on new trends in functional food science.

Paulus M. Verschuren
Unilever Health Institute
Wim Saris
Maastricht University