

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

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“Please Leave My Oysters Alone”

As a native Louisianian, I truly love oysters. Now, Cambridge scientists and profiteers are planning to “alter” or fortify shellfish, including oysters, to tackle human nutrient deficiencies which cause severe health problems across the world. The team is now working with major seafood manufacturers to further test their microencapsulation technology, or "Vitamin Bullets". Here is their pitch: “Over two billion people worldwide are nutrient deficient, leading to a wide range of serious health problems. Fortifying food with micronutrients is already an industry standard for enhancing public health. Scientists have teamed up to supercharge one of the world's most healthy and sustainable sources of animal protein: bivalve shellfish such as oysters, clams and mussels.” They have produced the world's first microcapsule ("Vitamin Bullets") specially designed to deliver nutrients to bivalves which are beneficial to human health. When we eat bivalves, we consume the entire organism including its gut, meaning that we digest the nutrients which the animals consumed towards the end of their lives. The scientists tested Vitamin A and D fortified microcapsules on over 100 oysters to identify the optimal dose. The team found that fortified oysters delivered around 100 times more Vitamin A, and over 150 times more Vitamin D, than natural oysters. Even more importantly, they dramatically outperformed salmon, one of the best natural sources of these vitamins. A serving of just two of their supercharged shellfish provided enough Vitamin A and D to meet human Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDAs). They claim that Vitamin A and D deficiencies pose a particularly serious public health challenge—in Ghana more than 76% of children are Vitamin A deficient, causing widespread mortality and blindness. In India, 85% of the population is Vitamin D deficient, which causes cardiovascular diseases, osteoporosis, and rickets. Even in the US, over 40% of people are Vitamin D deficient. They hope to improve the health of millions, while also reducing the harm that meat production is doing to the environment. Bivalves have a higher protein content than beef, are a rich source of omega-3 fatty acids and have some of the highest levels of key minerals of all animal foods. These shellfish are also highly sustainable to farm. They believe that consumers are more likely to buy slightly more expensive fortified food than to make additional purchases for supplemental pills. The Vitamin Hoax, in the November 2007 issue of Reader's Digest, listed ten vitamins which they recommended that you either skip or do not take, including vitamins A, C, E, beta carotene, selenium, folic acid, niacin, lycopene, iron and zinc.

In the America that I love, we know all that one needs to maintain good health is a well-balanced nutritious diet. So, stop “tinkering” with my oysters.

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