Global partnerships for a safer, healthier world—the work of the International Life Sciences Institute

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This paper discusses the International Life Sciences Institute or ILSI as an example of an effective global entity which relies on partnerships.

ILSI is a public, non-profit foundation supported by industry, private foundations, and government funding. It has a membership of more than 350 companies and an international network of over 3000 scientists. This network of scientists represents a unique model. It is a global partnership of scientists from academia, government, industry and the public sector.

ILSI was founded in 1978. Its goal was to unite the food industry in order collectively to sponsor research in food safety and nutrition. By sharing information and resources, ILSI has generated a significant body of scientific data. Today, ILSI has 12 branches around the world; this facilitates cooperation among regulators, scientific organizations, and industries.

In addition to research, ILSI sponsors conferences to update scientific knowledge in nutrition, food and chemical safety, allergy, pathology, toxicology and environmental health. Every year we cosponsor about 50 conferences around the globe, often with The World Health Organization (WHO) as a cosponsor.

ILSI has NGO (non-governmental organization) status with WHO. An ILSI scientist, Dr Ratko Buzina, is located in WHO headquarters in Geneva to liaise between ILSI and WHO. We also work closely with other organizations such as FAO, UNICEF, the European Union and many national agencies.

MICRONUTRIENT DEFICIENCIES

ILSI has taken a proactive role in helping to eliminate micronutrient deficiencies, which affect more than 2 billion people. Children are especially vulnerable. ILSI is the secretariat for two global programs, called IVACG and INACG, intending to eliminate vitamin A deficiency and iron deficiency anemia throughout the world. In September 1997 in Cairo, Egypt, IVACG is holding a major international meeting on vitamin A. I would like to describe some other examples of collaborative partnerships.

Four years ago together with PAHO (Pan American Health Organization), ILSI launched a feasibility study to examine how to minimize micronutrient deficiencies among children in Ecuador. The results of the study were presented to Ecuador's public health authorities. The government responded enthusiastically and initiated new programs such as fortifying flour with iron and B vitamins, and fortifying sugar with vitamin A. PAHO is following up by spearheading similar projects in 15 countries.

In Asia in December 1996, ILSI held a conference in Manila on micronutrient deficiencies. Soon thereafter, the government of the Philippines and the Philippine Chamber of Food Manufacturers signed a memorandum of understanding to work together on intervention strategies. Fortification with micronutrients of staple

commodities such as flour, salt, sugar and rice is being actively considered.

Similarly, ILSI has been one of the partners helping the Russian government minimize deficiencies in iodine, iron, fluoride and selenium. In November 1997 ILSI will hold in China a workshop on fortification. As in the Philippines, government officials and industry representatives will attempt to outline a course of action on how to minimize iron and vitamin A deficiencies in China.

OVERNUTRITION

The next example I would like to mention is directed at the opposite end of the nutritional spectrum—overnutrition. In the United States, the prevalence of childhood obesity has increased more than 50% in the past two decades. Today, more than 22% of children are overweight.

A year and a half ago, ILSI launched a major physical activity and nutrition program for children and the elderly. We joined forces with a number of organizations, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, WHO and several universities.

ILSI will soon publish an authoritative monograph on the causes and consequences of obesity in children. Another part of the program is to train professionals and place them in schools and community centers to help children become more physically active.

NUTRITION AND AGING

Together with WHO and other organizations, ILSI has held two international conferences in Tokyo, Japan, on nutrition and aging. The next conference will also be in Tokyo in 1999, which has been designated as the year of the elderly. In addition, ILSI and WHO plan to publish a manual on proper nutrition and physical activity of the elderly.

GLOBAL HARMONIZATION OF FOOD SAFETY STANDARDS

ILSI is also promoting the concept of global harmonization of food safety standards. ILSI branches together with scientists from FAO and WHO have sponsored more than 20 workshops in Asia, Latin America, and central and eastern Europe to update the scientific and regulatory communities with the latest information on many issues, including foodborne diseases and their control, water safety, and micronutrient deficiencies.

In 1998 in Beijing, ILSI will cosponsor the third Asian Conference on Nutrition and Food Safety. It is expected that over 500 scientists will participate.

NUTRITION AND HEALTH PROMOTION

ILSI is playing a key role in the area of nutrition and health promotion. It is now clear that promoting good nutrition can help increase immune defenses against infectious agents and auto-immune disorders, and, in general, help to prevent chronic diseases.

In April 1997, ILSI, together with many partners including WHO, sponsored a seminal conference on the relationship of nutrition to immunity. Data were presented showing that several nutrients, including vitamins A and B12, can play a part in enhancing the body’s response to infectious agents such as HIV viruses.

In addition to the beneficial effects of specific nutrients, it has become evident that whole foods or non-nutrient food components can play a role in preventing disease and in maximizing optimal health. These foods have been defined as ‘functional foods’. In 1995 ILSI sponsored in Singapore a conference which explored the health effects of several such foods and set a research agenda on how to validate health claims.

ILSI plans to publish a newsletter on nutrition and immunity that would cover new findings on the effects of functional foods and specific nutrients in optimizing health promotion.

GLOBAL PARTNERSHIPS

In closing, I would like to stress that ILSI has found that partnerships provide synergy and facilitate the accomplishment of goals. Up to now, in many cases, the public sector, international organizations, and government agencies have been reluctant to work with industry. This lack of trust has hindered the application of the latest technological advances to solving problems.
By sharing resources, we enrich one another and we can put into practice what we know. This exciting conference will help us take a new perspective on health promotion and see it as a global challenge requiring global cooperation. Together, as partners, we can effectively work toward a safer and healthier world.

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