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Megavitamin News

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An Editorial by Abram Hoffer, M.D., Ph.D.

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The test to determine whether a treatment has become popular within the medical profession is to measure the relative strength of the positive and negative assertions made about the treatment. The use of antibiotics is so well-entrenched in medicine that side effects and toxicities are recognized but are accepted as the price one must pay for their positive therapeutic properties. There are no physicians who have made it their life's work merely to attack antibiotics as a crusade. In sharp contrast, *vitamins which are safe even in large doses have not been acceptable to the profession, and their negative side effects have been consistently exaggerated and over-emphasized, to the point that many of these so-called toxicities have been invented, without there being any scientific evidence that these side effects are real. This pervasive negative attitude has spilled over to the news media, who have consistently followed the official line and have ignored all the claims made about the benefits of vitamins used in optimum amounts.* But over the past year or so there has been a significant change in media attitude reflecting a significant change in medical opinion.

March 12, 1992, Natalie Angier wrote an article entitled "Vitamins Revitalized as Health Agents", International Herald Tribune, which appeared in the New York Times and in the Globe and Mail March 14th. What is interesting in this report is not what it said, but the fact that it was said. The use of vitamins in megadoses was described without the usual massive attention to toxicity and a major warning to the readers to avoid these things as much as possible since they could get all they needed from food alone. Scientists have lost their fear of these high dosages. For example, Dr. S. N. Meydani of the Human Nutrition Research Center on Aging, at Tufts University in Boston said, "Now we are starting to think about what is the optimal level of vitamins for lifelong diseases and to prevent age-associated diseases." This university has been headed by a nutrition scientist who at every opportunity had derided the use of vitamins in his popular columns of advice to the American public. I assume that Dr. Meydani will not be fired. The impressive results achieved by the use of vitamins is gradually overcoming the reluctance of physicians to use them, even though they might be reluctant to advise patients to take them. Thus, Dr. I Jialal of the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas, is "... not yet willing to advise that the public start taking vitamin tablets, and he, like so many researchers, emphasizes the need for more studies. But he did admit that given his preliminary results and the relative harmlessness of Vitamin E, he himself planned to start a supplement of the nutrient daily." I have some good news for Dr. Jialal. Up to 60% of the population are already taking vitamin supplements and have been doing so for years. Contributors to this journal have been describing the use of optimum amounts of nutrients including vitamins ever since this journal was first published. Readers are not surprised by the information in the public media, and they may well wonder why it has taken so long. Angier opened her story with the following statement, "Long consigned to the fringes of medicine and accorded scarcely more credibility than crystal-rubbing or homeopathy, the study of how vitamins affect the body and help prevent chronic diseases is now winning broad attention and respect among mainstream medical researchers." She added, "They are gathering provocative evidence that vitamins influence nearly every organ, and that these enigmatic chemicals may help forestall or even reverse many diseases of aging, including cancer, heart disease, osteoporosis, a flagging immune system, neurodegeneration and other chronic disorders."

Equally interesting is the prominent attention given to these vitamins in the New York Times. This prestigious national newspaper has, since at least 1966, consistently ignored or criticized the use of

megavitamins. This was the policy of their editorial board. Many years ago at a meeting of the Huxley Institute of Biosocial Research in New York, I was approached by a writer who had been commissioned by the New York Times to attend our meeting and to prepare a report. He did attend for the day and one-half. This was the meeting which was greeted by Mayor Koch. At the end of the meeting this reporter approached me and asked whether I would spend some time answering his questions. I replied that I saw no point in doing so, since if he wrote anything favorable the New York Times would not publish it. He was astounded at my statement, and reassured me that so far he had not had any of the articles, which they had asked him to write, rejected. I agreed to see him on Monday at my hotel. He came to my room mid-afternoon and stayed until 7 p.m., until my wife and I had to leave to attend the opera. He assured me that his report would appear in the Sunday Supplement within two weeks. After several months had passed I called him to find out what had happened and would his article ever appear. He said that the editorial board had wanted a few points clarified and could we meet again next time I was there. I agreed. Again I spent several hours with him. The story never appeared. I assumed it was favorable, although the writer did not tell me what the tenor of his report would be like. I assumed that a senior editor who had been writing major articles against the use of vitamins had killed the story. It is possible the writer was a fraud and had nothing whatever to do with the New York Times, but I considered this highly unlikely after getting to know him so well. This little episode merely illustrates the entrenched opposition of the Times to orthomolecular nutrition. They had shown similar opposition to articles written by my friend, Dr. Walter Alvarez. After a particularly critical article against psychoanalysis appeared in his column in the New York Times, the newspaper concealed his column. It looks as if the New York Times has undergone a conversion experience.

Almost every modern, acceptable treatment needed forty or more years before that treatment became acceptable. I have for many years predicted that it would take about forty years before megavitamin therapy would become widely accepted. I had started the clock at 1957 when we first published our paper describing the use of large doses of Vitamin B3 for the treatment of acute schizophrenia. I assumed that by the year 1997 this would become the recognized best treatment. Orthomolecular treatment originated from that particular study as one of the main roots. The other was the work by Linus Pauling who defined the term orthomolecular and placed his immense scientific prestige and knowledge behind the concept. His seminal work on Vitamin C and the cold and flu, and more recently on the use of this vitamin in the treatment of cancer, and very recently on the role Vitamin C plays in preventing hardening of the arteries, has been the most potent factor in swaying public opinion and, sometime after that, scientific opinion. But I now think that general medicine will be ahead of psychiatry, which requires much more effort to be persuaded to look at different findings and treatment philosophies.

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