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From Probiotics To Prebiotics, Postbiotics and Synbiotics – The IPA Expands Its Scope

by David Ridley

The International Probiotics Association has expanded its remit to include prebiotics, postbiotics and synbiotics – combinations of pre- and probiotics. HBW Insight asks the IPA's executive director George Paraskevakos what this means for the consumer healthcare industry and what the future of the microbiome-based wellness market might hold.

The International Probiotics Association has decided to expand its remit to cover new categories of microbiome-related food supplements.

Following a meeting of its board of directors, the IPA recently announced that its work would in future include all the “biotics” – postbiotics, prebiotics and synbiotics (combinations of pre- and probiotics) – within the human, infant and companion animal segments of the international food and dietary supplement industries.

The decision was taken, the IPA explained in its press release, because these categories “so nicely complement the probiotics market.”

However, the expansion would in “no way” impede the association’s focused efforts regarding the probiotics category, it added.

“In fact, it will only strengthen our ownership within these ‘biotic’ categories,” it said.

Not On Radar

Back when the IPA was formed in 2001, probiotics were “kind of on the radar screen, but really not,” IPA executive director George Paraskevakos reflected, speaking exclusively to HBW Insight.

When Paraskevakos joined as executive director in 2015 from Canadian probiotic manufacturer

Lallemand Health Solutions, the IPA had expanded to approximately 40 members, he said.

“Today we’re about 110 members covering 30 countries across the world,” he continued. “We represent the industry in every facet. We don’t only have manufacturers of bacteria and probiotics. We also have manufacturers of finished products.”

During the pandemic, when interest in the gut microbiome and its immunity modulating effects boomed, Paraskevakos and his IPA colleagues began to see an uptick in interest in postbiotics, which are essentially the end result of a healthy gut microbiome doing its job.

Inanimate but bioactive compounds like short-chain fatty acids, lipopolysaccharides, enzymes, lysates and vitamins that are produced when probiotics consume prebiotic fibers, postbiotics are thought to have beneficial effects on health.

Conflicting Definitions

However, there is a lack of clarity even among experts as to how new microbiome product categories like postbiotics should be defined, Paraskevakos pointed out.

“We found there was a lot of confusion with regards to what these things were, because you have different groups publishing definitions around what a postbiotic should be,” he said.

For example, the International Scientific Association of Probiotics and Prebiotics (ISAPP) published in 2021 a definition of a postbiotic as a “preparation of inanimate microorganisms and/or their components that confers a health benefit on the host.”

But “not everybody agrees with that,” Paraskevakos noted. “There’s another three or four ‘consensus definitions,’ as they are called. But there’s not really a consensus.”

Then as prebiotics – the fibers like oligosaccharides that feed the gut microbiome – also became popular, the IPA saw a similar confusion arising in this category. (Also see "[Over The Counter 6 Jan 2023: Prebiotics And Consumer Health: Opportunity, Regulation and Future, With Clasado's Per Rehné](#)" - HBW Insight, 6 Feb, 2023.)

To bring clarity to the expanding microbiome sector, the IPA therefore formed a “strategic taskforce” with the aim of looking further into these new biotics.

As explained at the recent board meeting, this taskforce will initially focus on the creation of a road map and a gap analysis of the resources required to “properly steward these new areas of work.”

Probiotics Model

Strategically, Paraskevacos said the idea was to approach these new biotic categories like the IPA had probiotics.

“We did a good job on the probiotics side,” he argued. “So we thought we'd take from those successes, emulating what we did best and thereby bring some clarity and structure to these other categories.”

“We're not going to try and define anything,” he added. The aim, as with probiotics, is just to make sure that products on the market are safe and efficacious, and that consumers feel a benefit when using them, he said.

Ultimately, the IPA wants to see long-term stable growth for biotics, rather than a boom-and-bust type situation, he explained.

“We want sustainable growth, not just making whatever profit we can this year and moving on to something else next year,” he insisted. “That’s been my message to our industry.”

Codex Alimentarius

As for probiotics, the IPA is hoping that the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and World Health Organization’s Codex Alimentarius Commission will consider undertaking additional work in this area aimed at harmonizing international standards, guidelines and codes of practice.

At an upcoming meeting, the Codex Committee on Nutrition and Foods for Special Dietary Uses (CCNFSDU) will hopefully discuss a proposal originally submitted by Argentina in 2019, derailed subsequently by the pandemic, on prioritization.

The proposal for new work, which was not supported by some delegations, included supporting national legislative frameworks for probiotics and providing a general understanding through setting a definition, minimum characterization requirements, safety criteria, quality and labelling criteria.

“If we can create a Codex standard for probiotics, we can maybe avoid or get rid of the divergence in national regulations, and put everything on the same footing,” Paraskevacos explained. “But it's a long process.”

EU Divergence

In the meantime, divergence is benefitting the probiotics market in Europe, with more and more countries allowing companies to put “probiotic” on product labels and, in some cases, also make a related health claim. (Also see "[France Becomes Latest EU Member To Allow 'Probiotic' Label For Dietary Supplements](#)" - HBW Insight, 12 Jan, 2023.)

While Paraskevakos welcomed this liberalization, he also struck a cautious note.

“Ultimately, you know, there's certain criteria that have to be met for an organism to be called a probiotic,” he pointed out. “We stand by that.”

“If you make suggestions on your label that your product is for a specific area or condition, then that has to also be backed by scientifically justified research,” he continued.

“It’s not like we’re trying to circumvent regulations,” he added. “But there is perhaps a middle ground between no regulations and those expected for medicines?”

Spread Your Wings

As for the future of probiotics, Paraskevakos expected further mergers and acquisitions as the market grows. “We’ve certainly lost members to consolidation, big guys buying small guys,” he said.

Paraskevakos also expected the applications of probiotics to become more specific, as the science develops and reaches a consensus on areas of application.

“We've gone past that idea that you should take a probiotic because generally is good for you,” he said. “Now, it’s about specific conditions.”

In recent years, for example, research suggests the existence of various “axes” – gut-brain, gut-immunity etc. – linking a healthy microbiome to the optimal functioning of various parts of the body.

“I think the science will just continue to build,” Paraskevakos predicted. “Hopefully, education will also be taken forward so that people will truly understand how much these organisms, from a preventive approach, make a real difference to health.”

Regulation might also follow suit, he hoped, to allow the IPA and its members “some elbow room to expand our wings to help spread the message.”