



## **Nutrition, Health & Wellness from the Tree of Life**

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**T**he ‘International Symposium on Quality Coconut Oil for Nutrition and Health’ held in New Delhi, 28-29 September 2015 organised and funded jointly by APCC and CDB India, brought together highly eminent physicians, medical doctors, nutritionists, scientists, industrialists and a handful of leading coconut stakeholders. The team together reviewed the clinical research work conducted to date on coconut oil including studies under consideration in some countries enabling the establishment of the APCC Scientific Committee on Clinical Studies. The strategic way forward for completion of conclusive impact studies that would scientifically declare the truth about the nutrition and health benefits of coconut oil were also charted by the symposium.

It would be in order for me to utilize fully the clinical statement put out over 20 years ago by the eminent Professor Emeritus, Dr Jon J. Kabara, Ph.D of Michigan State University and Consultant to Private Industries,

Universities and Government Agencies in Galena, Illinois, USA, as follows:

“Our prediction at an international conference of the American Oil Chemist Society (1995) that these tropical oil derivatives were going to be the new health oils for the next millennium is coming true. Not only does monolaurin have antibiotic and antiviral activity but also these remarkable derivatives have been shown not to cause resistance organisms to appear. In addition, it has now been shown that monolaurin can reduce the resistance of germs to antibiotics.

Never before in recent times has recognition of the positive health effects of tropical oils been stronger. New and exciting health and industrial uses of monolaurin are available and predictable. Monolaurin derived from coconut and palm kernel oils suggest a bright future for an industry that was once referred to as a “sunset industry”. This means that the oil industry must move quickly to modernize itself in making value added

products from these oils which will contribute to a more vigorous and healthy agriculture future.”

The baseline ‘matter of fact’ for stakeholders of the coconut industry is assurance of economic viability that would primarily sustain coconut tree population and induce further replenishment including growth in new planting of coconut lands. To achieve this it would be vital for the various products of coconut to be well-positioned as marketable and profitable, both in the domestic and international consumers markets. Negative campaigns against coconut oil at the time also included most other tropical oils in the past 30 years, especially palm and palm kernel oil. These campaigns were driven mostly by patrons of opposing vegetable oils based on untruth and falsely fabricated commercial innuendos. The negative impact of these campaigns sent the coconut industry world-over reeling back into what is referred to commonly now as a ‘sunset industry’. During that time national newspapers of coconut growing countries carried depressing headlines such as ‘coconut is a dying industry’ and growers lamenting their economic state with ‘diversify or die’, in other words, move away or try something else apart from just the coconuts. As a result, the mindset created then is clearly demonstrated in current statistical data indicating very little replanting to replace senile palms and minimal or no new development of coconut lands. It affected many countries’ ability to secure adequate funds relating to coconut activities from their own governments therefore had little chance of obtaining external donor support.

Why am I recounting and telling all these? The old adage quips that ‘if you reach the bottom and cannot go down any further, the only way out is up’. To go back up in a sustainable manner, the industry would need to create an impact so great that there would no longer be another downward trend again so the sun does not set again, so to say, on the coconut industry. One of the best impact strategies is to declare, with scientific proof and evidence, that coconut, coconut oil and the many edible products of coconut are nutritious and healthy for human consumption derived from our natural organic environment.

The 52<sup>nd</sup> APCC Session/Ministerial Meeting in 2016 would be looking forward to endorsing clinical study proposals as projects to be undertaken in cooperation with APCC member countries as well as the consumer communities at the export destinations of coconut products. It is expected that at least one study proposal each in the area of cardiology, dermatology and lifestyle diseases would be considered from India, Philippines and Indonesia respectively. The protocols important to the design and planning of these studies would be put together with the assistance of the newly established APCC Scientific Committee on Clinical Studies under

the Chair of Dr Fabian Dayrit of the Philippines. The researches would be based on, what is referred to by clinical scientists as, Class 1 international study standards that require a multi-country and multi-ethnic population sample.

This is not to say that already concluded studies are insufficient but to the contrary as those need not be defended as they are work concluded and accepted internationally. The continuation of studies would be those in the gaps identified as a result of the Symposium and new categories not previously studied. The partnership and input of important UN bodies such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) would be crucial in enabling the setting of overall study protocols that ensure credible and internationally accepted outcomes that would achieve the desired impact.

The results from ongoing studies on use of coconut oil as per a number of studies presented at the Symposium would be concluded to create this impact. An example is the hypothesis presented in the current study by Dr Vermen M Verallo-Rowell, award winning Dermatologist from the Philippines, showing coconut oil being significantly more anti-inflammatory than commonly used seed oils patterned on Western diets.

Whilst the initial study on coconut oil and its association with CAD were undertaken in India by Amrita Institute of Medical Science (AIMS), comparing intake of coconut oil or sunflower oil showed no significant variations however clinical researcher in-charge of that project, Dr M Vijayakumar, Clinical Professor of Cardiology at AIMS, reported important limitations to that study therefore recommended a look at the outcomes of study in different ethnic population. This recommendation has initiated the call for an international collaboration on the selected studies.

In summarizing the Symposium, the Chairman of APCC Technical Working Group sounded the participants on the theme ‘From Diet to Therapy’ as the focus on moving with clinical studies as the respective researchers and institutions proceed to design phase in relation to the study gaps identified and which ones to progress. The stakeholders of the coconut industry stand to be target beneficiaries of the results and positive outcomes of the clinical studies projects however their dual role is as important in being the custodians of our performance as a team going forward.

APCC is pleased with the outcomes of the Symposium and is committed to working together with willing institutions and individual researchers so that we are able to cross this threshold of knowledge with clinical studies that are well-designed and implemented to reach the much awaited status of scientific declarations needed to impact well on international consumers and markets. ■