

# Quest to find food people want to eat

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THE quest to add value is never-ending for most food exporters and Fonterra is often top of the list of those failing to do so.

But the co-operative was more than milk powder and there was a team of scientists in Palmerston North focused on creating new food products that enhance health and wellbeing.

That team was led by chief science and technology officer Dr Jeremy Hill who said the dairy producer was in a unique position, mainly because of the raw material at the heart of its research.

“Dairy is designed for nutrition,” he said. “Milk is not designed for another purpose. It’s not like plant material or meat. Milk is designed for nutrition, that’s its sole purpose.”

So, Fonterra’s scientists had been studying the different parts of milk to understand more about how it helped growth, development and nutrition.

“It’s highly likely that the array of components in milk have important functions,” Hill said.

One breakthrough came from research, done through the Transforming the Dairy Value Chain Primary Growth Partnership programme with the Government, on complex milk lipids (CMLs) such as gangliosides.

“Consumers want it all.”

Dr Jeremy Hill  
Fonterra

Those CMLs came from the fat material in milk. They were minor components present in relatively small amounts.

“But they can have quite profound effects.” Breastfed babies have a higher level of CMLs in their brains, which is associated with improved scores on a range of cognitive measures.

“They’re really important for cognition – thinking, memory and mental development.”

Fonterra’s research partnership demonstrated CMLs extracted from cows’ milk provided cognitive benefits for people similar to those from human breast-milk.

They had now been able to develop CMLs as a cost-effective ingredient used to create functional foods.

Hill said the scope could be enormous.

“At the moment we’re looking at cognitive development in children and infants.”

“But there’s the potential for cognitive enhancement throughout all life stages.

“We don’t know the potential yet for applying it to the problems we face at the other end of the spectrum, which is retaining cognitive function as we age.”

But isolating the good stuff wasn’t the end of the process. Fonterra was, after all, a food company, not a supplement maker.

The goal was to produce great food that people chose to eat, which had the added benefit of being good for them.

“People are looking for healthy, nutritious products but they’re also looking for convenience, for taste, they’re looking for affordability and they’re looking for a range of other things that fit in with their lifestyles and their values.

“Consumers want it all.”

Helpfully, research also showed it was often the interactions between components of food that had the greatest nutritional benefit.

“I think you can extract components and put them into supplements if you wanted and that’s a perfectly valid thing to do,” Hill said.

“But the great thing about taking a dietary route with a food is that you’ve got that broad spectrum of benefits that you get from nutrition with an enhanced benefit. And of course the convenience – people still need to eat food.

“They’re eating it for sustenance, for satiety, for pleasure, as part of entertainment as well as the basic nutrition benefit. You don’t get that with a pill.”



GOOD FOR YOU: Dairy is designed for nutrition, Fonterra’s chief science and technology officer Dr Jeremy Hill says.

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