



“WE HAVE TO CHANGE THE PARADIGM...”

Self-described “concept man” Patrick Holford talks to *Hatty Willmoth* about 40 years of making waves in nutrition

Patrick Holford is a charismatic speaker; he talks in stories with rhetorical flourish, and it’s easy to become a little entranced. After all, he’s such an icon in the nutritional therapy world.

Holford is either a much-loved or highly-controversial figure, with a plethora of achievements under

his name. For a start, he is widely considered to be the father of ‘nutritional therapy’ as a profession, having founded the Institute for Optimum Nutrition (ION) in 1984. Involved in various studies and campaigns, and having authored 46 books, he has for decades advocated for preventative, lifestyle and nutritional

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approaches to healthcare.

And, he says, it all started on a hill in 1982. “Having deeply contemplated what Drs Linus Pauling and Abram Hoffer meant by ‘orthomolecular medicine’, I realised that the future of medicine, disease prevention and reversal hinged on optimum nutrition.”

Twice Nobel-laureate Dr Linus Pauling was an American chemist and biochemist who was studying the role of vitamins in health; whilst Abram Hoffer, a Canadian biochemist, physician and psychiatrist, believed nutrition could treat cancer and schizophrenia.

“‘Ortho’ means ‘right’,” says Holford. “So the realisation that they’d had was that most of the diseases that we suffer from are a result of not getting the right intake of nutrients, which creates a biochemical wobble, and then leads to things like inflammation.

“And the concept... was, by understanding our genetics and biochemical individuality, and understanding what level of nutrients reverses disease processes, we enter a new era in medicine; which we could call nutritional medicine, functional medicine, optimum nutrition, or orthomolecular medicine.”

Building from the brain

Holford’s own background was in psychology. “My focus when I was studying at university was in two areas,” he says. “One was on intelligence and how you can have more of it; the other was on schizophrenia.”

Hoffer had been administering ‘megavitamin therapy’ (large doses of vitamins) to patients with schizophrenia. Reading Hoffer’s paper on niacin (vitamin B3) and schizophrenia inspired Holford so much that he “jumped on a plane” to meet the man himself.

Founding ION

Hoffer’s methods have been contested,¹ and follow-up studies have reported inconsistent and inconclusive results.² However, meeting Hoffer and his patients is what Holford describes as his “second turning point”.

Deciding to dedicate his professional life to nutrition, Holford set up ION in 1984. But, as he tells this next story, it seems as if it was almost by accident.

In the early 1980s, having learnt from Pauling and Hoffer, Holford had returned to the UK and begun seeing



ION nutritional therapy graduates

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clients.

“I called myself a nutrition consultant,” he says. “I believe I was the first nutrition consultant, as such — later to become nutritional therapists. Very quickly, I became fully booked. I had a waiting list of over three months. And then I was approached by some individuals who said, ‘we’d like to learn to do what you are doing’.

“I realised that the power of this new approach was such that we really did need to formally set up training... That was the origin of the idea of the Institute for Optimum Nutrition: a place to create a new profession of nutritional therapists.”

Whilst some argued that nutrition should become “the cornerstone of medicine”, Holford thought doctors did not have the time to study nutrition properly. The answer, therefore, was to train an army of highly-skilled nutritional therapists who were not only knowledgeable about nutrition, but could work alongside doctors to help people bring about nutrition and lifestyle changes.

At ION, Holford brought in experts to teach and was keen to elevate the standard of study.

“Quite soon we got it to a degree-level training,” he says. Eventually, in 1998 he stepped down as ION’s CEO, leaving to work on other projects, but remaining a Fellow.

He’s pleased that ION has gone on to form a partnership with the University of Portsmouth, offering university-validated courses including a BSc

(Hons) and a graduate diploma.

“I’m very excited that ION has at last crossed that bridge. It has been quite a movement in the past to keep nutritional therapy out of mainstream education, and of course we desperately need to have it integrated.”

Courting controversy

Whilst science remains a cornerstone of ION’s courses (degree applicants must have at least one science A level or its equivalent) Holford’s own work, at and after ION, often sparked contention in the mainstream medical and scientific community. In the early 2000s, an entire blog was set up called *HolfordWatch*, which accused him of propagating “bad science” in order to sell supplements.³ Perhaps the most notorious of his controversies stemmed from what he dubs his “third turning point”.

“In 1990, Linus Pauling and immunologist Dr Raxit Jariwalla [and Steve Harakeh] published a paper that changed my life,” he says.

The paper stated that if human T-cells were infected with HIV, and then saturated with a non-toxic level of vitamin C, within four days there was a greater than 99% inactivation of the virus.⁴

Holford saw this as potentially ground-breaking, lifesaving research, and advocated for the use of vitamin C in large doses. He believed that it would even be more effective than AZT, the first prescribable anti-HIV drug.⁵

His claims, however, attracted

widespread criticism because no clinical, human trials had been conducted to follow Pauling, Jariwalla and Harakeh’s work on cells. A study had been planned, he says, but funding was pulled.

Holford says that he was “vilified” and “harassed” for criticising the pharmaceutical industry. “After that, I wrote the book *Food is Better Medicine than Drugs* with the award-winning medical journalist Jerome Burne. The gloves were off. Of course, I was somewhat blacklisted as a result.”

Alzheimer’s: changing the paradigm

The effects of high-dose vitamin C on people with HIV/AIDS remain unknown. Holford’s recent work, however, seems to have attracted less criticism; for example a VitaminC4Covid campaign,⁶ although his stance on vitamin C as an intervention for Covid remains controversial.

“We now have over 1,000 scientists, many professors, doctors, nutrition professionals and front-line workers from dozens of countries around the world supporting and promoting the use of vitamin C both to shorten early infection and in IV treatment in intensive care, where it can be a lifesaver,” he says.

“Our first paper just became ‘editor’s choice’ in the world’s leading nutrition journal *Nutrients*, with over 27,000 downloads.”⁷

And now he has turned his attention to the Alzheimer’s is Preventable (AIP) campaign, which he says he is working on “day and night” ahead of its autumn launch.⁸

The project, by the Food for the Brain Foundation,⁹ draws on research about the risk factors for Alzheimer’s, particularly that which has been conducted by its director, Professor David Smith, at the University of Oxford. In light of the estimate that only 1% of Alzheimer’s cases are caused by genes, the campaign seeks to target Alzheimer’s by lifestyle-based prevention.

In 2011, the Foundation digitised and validated a standard Cognitive Function Test that calculates a person’s estimated risk of developing dementia, and to date nearly 380,000 people have taken the test. Now, the charity is launching an app called COGNITION, to help people target the eight risk factors associated with developing Alzheimer’s, with personalised lifestyle recommendations. It’s a project about

"I stand for a future where humanity can be healthy and doesn't have to suffer through all of these preventable diseases"

which Holford is clearly passionate. He expresses disappointment that attempts to work with the NHS failed; actively blocked, he believes.

"But," he says, "we — David and I — continued pushing towards the obvious solution: prevention. And to achieve prevention there has to be action. That is what COG-NITION and the Alzheimer's is Preventable campaign is all about. David and I calculated that we could reasonably reduce the incidence of dementia by a third if all known modifiable risk factors were targeted. That means 260 less people diagnosed a day in the UK, or 95,000 less in a year.

"There is no drug, nor will there be in the foreseeable future, if ever. Prevention is the only way. These kinds of points need to be repeatedly said until they are known. We have to change the paradigm."

And it's a stance on dementia and Alzheimer's that is gaining traction, as the multiple causes identified by researchers make a silver bullet cure unlikely.

Ignorance and addiction

Holford may continue to be divisive, yet he has dedicated decades to changing the health paradigm. He says: "I have no doubt that the vast majority of the diseases we suffer are a consequence of not achieving optimum nutrition, or getting too many of those anti-nutrients.

"I would say generally there are only two drivers of disease," he continues. "One is ignorance, and the other is addiction. People are ignorant of what it is that they need to be healthy, or they know but they're addicted — be it to sugar or cigarettes or alcohol. So ultimately, my work has been about relieving ignorance, through education, and helping people who are addicted to become un-addicted."

And he has persevered, despite widespread criticism. Why?

"The command of Linus Pauling when I met him last before he died was, follow the logic. And I realised what I need to always do is stand in the logic, or the truth of things, whether or not they are popular at that particular time, and not detour from that.

"I just keep focused on the truth and the logic, and some may love it, and some may hate it, but my job is just to keep focused."

For Holford, it's all about the big picture: "I'm not really a details man. I'm a sort of concept man; that happens to be my natural talent or skill. I stand for a future where humanity can be healthy and doesn't have to suffer through all of these preventable diseases."

After all, he says, "the definition of insanity is to keep doing the same thing and expect different results".

References:

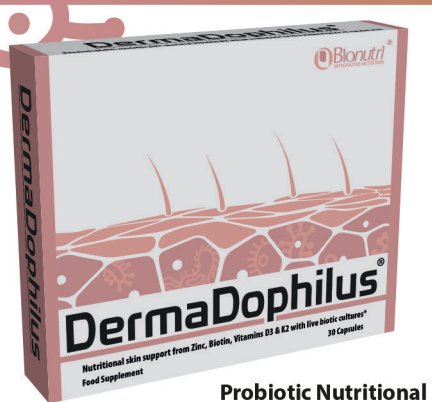
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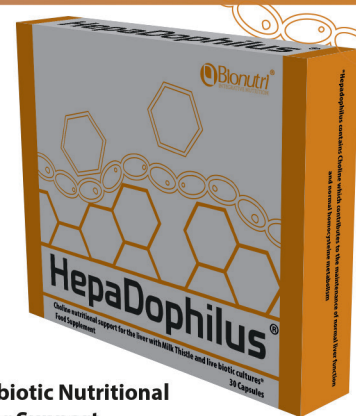
Functional Biotics

It was in the 1970's when **Professor Franz Gerlach**, the then head of Vaccine Research in the Department of Microbiology at the Issels Hospital in West Germany, used the opportunity to explore his passion in trying to identify the role that the intestinal bacteria played in health and disease. He went on to state that *'over the years I have yet to see a normal or healthy composition of intestinal bacteria in any one suffering with a chronic illness'*. When Professor Gerlach eventually retired he went on to state that *'I believe that it will be possible sometime in the future to identify and develop specific combinations of friendly gut bacteria that have a supportive role in human health and be an adjunct to standard medical treatments'*

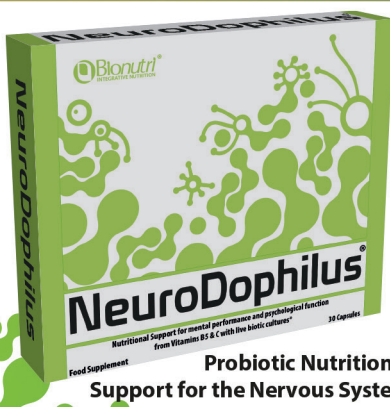
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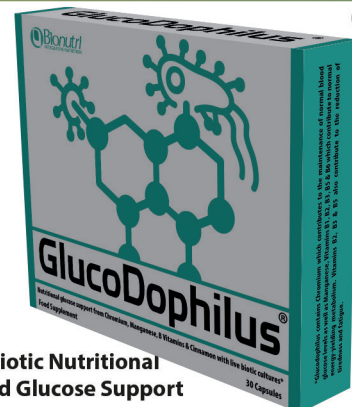
Probiotic Nutritional Skin Support



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