

John Mason – a tribute

John Mason did not take for granted that widely accepted ideas had to be correct. In a 2014-paper in *International Journal of Epidemiology*, entitled “Vitamin A policies need rethinking,”¹ he questioned the sense of continuing the high-dose vitamin A supplementation program that has been going on for decades. John’s main point was that high dose vitamin A capsules (HDVAC) no longer appeared to have any impact on young child mortality and would not improve vitamin A status, but stood in the way for other, better-suited interventions with lower physiological doses of vitamin A.

We agreed with John that the time had come to rethink vitamin A policies. HDVAC is a complex, not well understood intervention, with immunomodulatory effects. This is emphasised by the fact that the effect of HDVAC on overall mortality and morbidity is unrelated to the degree of underlying vitamin A deficiency².

John contacted us by email to continue the discussion, and we each contacted people within our network, and in this informal way, a diverse group of scientists (the “vitamin A mavericks”) was formed. We came from different backgrounds: medicine, nutrition, epidemiology, but we had one thing in common: we were deeply concerned that the universal high-dose vitamin A supplementation program continued without any deeper reflection, as a train without a driver, while evidence accumulated, which should have led to immediate reconsideration.

Together, we wrote a head-to-head to BMJ, arguing against some of the fiercest vitamin A proponents that YES, the universal high-dose vitamin A supplementation program should be stopped immediately³. Another joint paper has been submitted and yet another is in pipeline. Sadly, John will not be with us to see them published, nor to see the end of the universal vitamin A program.

John and his passionate fight for common sense approaches to improve the nutritional status and reduce overall mortality of low-income populations will be greatly missed, but not forgotten; we will continue the fight. May his soul rest in peace.

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References

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