AUGUST 9, 2009 THESKEPTICARENA.COM

IT MAY BE VITAMIN D'S DAY IN THE SUN

IT MAY HAVE UNTAPPED POTENTIAL IN FIGHTING OR PREVENTING DISEASE. BUT ARE WE GETTING ENOUGH OF IT IN OUR SYSTEMS? A PANEL WILL DISCUSS WHETHER TO INCREASE THE RECOMMENDED DAILY INTAKE.

VITAMIN SUPPLEMENTS HAVE BEEN BOTH HERALDED AND HYPED OVER THE YEARS, ONLY TO ULTIMATELY FALL FROM GRACE ONCE RESEARCH PROVES THEM TO BE LITTLE MORE THAN PLACEBOS IN OUR QUEST FOR LONGER LIFE OR BETTER HEALTH. BUT AT LEAST ONE SUBSTANCE MAY HAVE TRUE MERIT -- VITAMIN D.

LONG CONSIDERED JUST A SUPPLEMENT CONSUMED WITH CALCIUM FOR BONE HEALTH, THIS HUMBLE VITAMIN MAY HAVE UNTAPPED POTENTIAL IN FIGHTING OR PREVENTING DISEASE, SUGGESTS AN EXPLOSION OF NEW RESEARCH. NOT ONLY HAS IT SHOWN PROMISE IN REDUCING THE RISK OF, AMONG OTHER THINGS, DIABETES, PANCREATIC CANCER, BREAST CANCER AND CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASE, BUT IT ALSO SEEMS TO IMPROVE INFERTILITY, WEIGHT CONTROL AND MEMORY.

TWO ADVOCACY GROUPS HAVE SPRUNG UP IN THE UNITED STATES TO PROMOTE THE SUBSTANCE. FOOD INDUSTRY EXECUTIVES ARE EXPLORING WAYS TO FORTIFY MORE PRODUCTS. AND PUBMED, AN INTERNATIONAL DATABASE OF MEDICAL LITERATURE, SHOWS THAT 2,274 STUDIES REFERENCING THE VITAMIN HAVE BEEN PUBLISHED -- JUST THIS YEAR.

"VITAMIN D IS ONE HOT TOPIC," SAYS CONNIE WEAVER, A PROFESSOR OF FOODS AND NUTRITION AT PURDUE UNIVERSITY IN INDIANA.

NEXT WEEK, HOPE AND HYPE MAY COLLIDE. AN INSTITUTE OF MEDICINE COMMITTEE WILL CONVENE IN WASHINGTON TO DISCUSS WHETHER THE RECOMMENDED DAILY INTAKE OF VITAMIN D AND CALCIUM SHOULD BE INCREASED. THERE, RESEARCHERS OVERWHELMED BY THE VITAMIN'S POTENTIAL WILL SQUARE OFF AGAINST SKEPTICS WHO SAY MUCH MORE STUDY IS NEEDED BEFORE PEOPLE ARE URGED TO TAKE VITAMIN D SUPPLEMENTS. GETTING THE NEWLY SUGGESTED AMOUNTS WOULD BE DIFFICULT OTHERWISE.

THE LAST TIME GUIDELINES WERE ISSUED ON THE VITAMIN WAS IN 1997, LONG BEFORE AN ONSLAUGHT OF SCIENTIFIC INFORMATION SUGGESTED PEOPLE ARE GETTING TOO LITTLE. CURRENTLY, THE RECOMMENDED DAILY INTAKE IS 200 TO 600 INTERNATIONAL UNITS WITH AN UPPER LIMIT OF 2,000 IU.

SOME RESEARCHERS ARE ADVOCATING AT LEAST 600 IU A DAY, WITH AN UPPER LIMIT OF 10,000 IU. GIVING IMPETUS TO THIS PUSH ARE THE FACTS THAT MANY PEOPLE SEEM TO BE DEFICIENT AND THAT THE NUTRIENT APPEARS TO PLAY A ROLE IN MANY CONDITIONS.

OTHER SCIENTISTS SAY IT'S TOO SOON TO URGE EVERYONE TO TAKE SUPPLEMENTS. AN INFLUENTIAL REPORT RELEASED IN JUNE BY THE AGENCY FOR HEALTHCARE RESEARCH AND QUALITY FOUND LITTLE CONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE TO SUPPORT INCREASING THE RECOMMENDED AMOUNTS.

"I THINK THERE IS A CONSENSUS THAT WE MIGHT BENEFIT FROM HIGHER VITAMIN D LEVELS," SAYS JAMES C. FLEET, A PROFESSOR OF FOODS AND NUTRITION AT PURDUE UNIVERSITY AND A LONGTIME RESEARCHER ON THE VITAMIN AND PROSTATE CANCER. "BUT THE COMMITTEE IS GOING TO ASK WHETHER THERE IS EXISTING SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE THAT IS STRONG ENOUGH TO MAKE A CHANGE."

VITAMIN D HAS LONG BEEN KNOWN TO BE CRUCIAL TO BONE AND MUSCLE HEALTH BY IMPROVING CALCIUM ABSORPTION IN THE INTESTINES AND THE WAY CALCIUM IS REGULATED IN BONES.

MORE RECENT RESEARCH SHOWS THAT RECEPTORS FOR IT ARE FOUND IN ALMOST EVERY ORGAN AND TISSUE SYSTEM IN THE BODY, SUGGESTING THAT DEFICIENCIES MAY AFFECT MANY TYPES OF CELL FUNCTIONS.

WHEN EXPOSED TO SUNLIGHT, THE SKIN MAKES THE VITAMIN, BUT NOT EVERYONE SPENDS THE FIVE MINUTES A DAY OR SO OUTSIDE THAT IS NECESSARY FOR SYNTHESIS -- AND MANY MORE PEOPLE TODAY WEAR SUNSCREEN TO PREVENT SKIN CANCER.

"A LARGE PORTION OF PEOPLE FALL INTO THE AT-RISK CATEGORY, AND THEY WOULD BENEFIT FROM BEING BROUGHT OUT OF THAT CATEGORY," FLEET SAYS. "THE QUESTION IS: IS THE CURRENT REQUIREMENT ENOUGH TO KEEP MOST PEOPLE OUT OF THE AT-RISK CATEGORY?"

A STUDY OF 13,000 AMERICANS, PUBLISHED IN MARCH IN THE ARCHIVES OF INTERNAL MEDICINE, FOUND THAT 50% TO 75% HAVE SUBOPTIMAL LEVELS BY CURRENT STANDARDS. A LEVEL OF 20 NANOGRAMS PER MILLILITER OF 25-HYDROXYVITAMIN D -- THE FORM MOST COMMONLY MEASURED IN BLOOD -- HAS TRADITIONALLY BEEN CONSIDERED SUFFICIENT.

MOST PEOPLE 50 AND OLDER AREN'T MEETING THE CURRENT RECOMMENDATIONS, WEAVER SAYS.

THE VITAMIN IS FOUND IN RELATIVELY FEW DIETARY SOURCES -- SOME FORTIFIED FOODS, SUCH AS MILK AND SOME CEREALS, AND NATURALLY ONLY IN SOME FATTY FISH, SUCH AS SALMON. THREE CUPS OF FORTIFIED MILK PROVIDE ONLY 300 IU.

"THE LARGEST SOURCE IS SUNSHINE, BUT NOT EVERYONE CAN DEPEND ON THAT," WEAVER SAYS. "THE ELDERLY, DARK-SKINNED PEOPLE, HIGHER-LATITUDE DWELLERS ALL HAVE TROUBLE GETTING ENOUGH FROM SUN." IN DARKER-SKINNED PEOPLE, MELATONIN IN THE SKIN BLOCKS ABSORPTION OF THE ULTRAVIOLET RAYS NEEDED TO MAKE THE VITAMIN; OLDER PEOPLE DON'T APPEAR TO SYNTHESIZE IT FROM THE SUN AS WELL AS YOUNGER PEOPLE.

SOME SCIENTISTS ARGUE THAT LEVELS OF 40 TO 60 NG/ML WOULD BE FAR BETTER FOR DISEASE PREVENTION. THAT WOULD REQUIRE DAILY INTAKE MUCH HIGHER THAN THE CURRENT 200 TO 600 IU.

THE JULY ISSUE OF THE ANNALS OF EPIDEMIOLOGY(09)X0007-4, DEVOTED TO VITAMIN D RESEARCH, LINKS THE VITAMIN TO LOWER RISKS OF CANCERS OF THE BREAST, COLON, OVARIES AND PROSTATE. ANIMAL AND LAB STUDIES ALSO DEMONSTRATE ITS IMPORTANCE IN MANY OF THE CELLULAR MECHANISMS THAT CONTROL CANCER, SUCH AS CELL GROWTH, CELL DEATH, INFLAMMATION AND DNA REPAIR.

FIVE STUDIES ON COLORECTAL CANCER AND BREAST CANCER, TAKEN TOGETHER, SHOWED THAT PEOPLE WITH LEVELS HIGHER THAN 34 TO 52 NG/ML HAD A 50% REDUCED CANCER RISK, SAYS CINDY D. DAVIS, A RESEARCHER AT THE NATIONAL CANCER INSTITUTE'S NUTRITIONAL SCIENCE RESEARCH GROUP.

SUCH STUDIES ARE NOT PROOF THAT THE VITAMIN INFLUENCES DISEASE DEVELOPMENT, POINTS OUT DR. KAREN E. HANSEN, AN ASSISTANT PROFESSOR AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN WHO STUDIES BONE HEALTH. "PEOPLE WITH HIGHER VITAMIN D MAY JUST BE HEALTHIER FOR OTHER REASONS," SHE SAYS.

BUT EVIDENCE LINKING HIGHER BLOOD LEVELS TO DIABETES AND CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASE IS ALSO MOUNTING. A STUDY IN DECEMBER IN THE JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN COLLEGE OF CARDIOLOGY FOUND THAT DEFICIENCY MAY INCREASE THE RISK OF CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASE. OTHER STUDIES HAVE TIED LOWER LEVELS TO AN INCREASED RISK OF HYPERTENSION, DIABETES, STROKE AND CONGESTIVE HEART FAILURE.

EVEN FOR BONE HEALTH, SOME STUDIES SUGGEST THAT ABOUT 700 TO 800 IU A DAY ARE NEEDED TO PREVENT FRACTURES IN PEOPLE OVER 50, HANSEN SAYS. SHE RECOMMENDS 800 IU A DAY, WITH CALCIUM, TO HER PATIENTS.

MEANWHILE, STUDIES SHOW THAT THE PREVIOUS ESTIMATION OF A TOXIC DOSE -- 2,000 IU A DAY -- IS MOST LIKELY TOO CONSERVATIVE. TOXIC DOSES CAN LEAD TO A DANGEROUS LEVEL OF CALCIUM IN THE BLOOD, HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE AND EVEN KIDNEY FAILURE.

"IT'S LIKELY THEY WILL INCREASE THEIR RECOMMENDATION FOR ALL AGES," HANSON SAID OF THE INSTITUTE OF MEDICINE COMMITTEE, WHICH WILL RELEASE ITS REPORT NEXT YEAR.

BUT NOT EVERYONE IS CONVINCED THE ADVICE SHOULD BE CHANGED. IN A REPORT ORDERED BY THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT TO ASSIST THE COMMITTEE, RESEARCHERS CONCLUDED THERE IS A LACK OF STRONG EVIDENCE TO SUPPORT ALTERING RECOMMENDATIONS. THE COMMITTEE IS NOT EXPECTED TO CHANGE CALCIUM RECOMMENDATIONS.

"WE DID NOT FIND DATA THAT INDICATE A SPECIFIC LEVEL OF VITAMIN D INTAKE IS ASSOCIATED WITH ADVERSE OUTCOMES OR BENEFICIAL HEALTH OUTCOMES," SAID DR. THOMAS A. TRIKALINOS, CO-DIRECTOR OF THE TUFTS EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE CENTER, WHICH PREPARED THE REPORT.

HE SAID THE REPORT WAS MEANT TO INFORM THE COMMITTEE AND DID NOT MAKE RECOMMENDATIONS.

"THE REPORT SEES THE TOTALITY OF THE EVIDENCE AND TRIES TO PUT EVERYTHING INTO PERSPECTIVE," TRIKALINOS SAYS.

ALREADY, HOWEVER, THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF CLINICAL ONCOLOGY HAS RECOMMENDED A HIGHER INTAKE FOR BREAST CANCER PATIENTS WHO ARE DEFICIENT.

IN OCTOBER, THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS SAID CHILDREN SHOULD GET 400 IU A DAY, DOUBLE THE CURRENT RECOMMENDATION.

IN NOVEMBER, 18 UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA RESEARCHERS ISSUED A STATEMENT SAYING 2,000 IU IS APPROPRIATE FOR MOST PEOPLE.

"I THINK SOME OF THE MORE VOCAL ADVOCATES ARE PUSHING THE MEDICAL COMMUNITY TO MOVE FORWARD" BEFORE ADEQUATE RESEARCH IS COMPLETED, FLEET SAYS.

DOZENS OF MORE SCIENTIFICALLY RIGOROUS STUDIES ARE IN PROGRESS THAT COULD HELP RESOLVE THE QUESTIONS ABOUT HOW MUCH PEOPLE SHOULD CONSUME.

"I THINK THEY HELD THIS [INSTITUTE OF MEDICINE] MEETING TWO TO FOUR YEARS TOO EARLY," FLEET SAYS. "THEY ARE WORKING WITHOUT THE BIG WAVE OF VITAMIN D RESEARCH THAT WAS INITIATED AFTER PEOPLE STARTED PUSHING FOR IT."

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THE SCIENCE SEGMENT

WUNDER BAR! SWISS STUMBLE ON LOW-CALORIE, NO-MELT CHOCOLATE

WE HAVE BEEN INDULGING IN IT IN VARIOUS FORMS FOR AT LEAST 3,000 YEARS, ARGUING OVER ITS INFLUENCE ON EVERYTHING FROM OUR SEXUAL APPETITES TO OUR WAISTLINES.

BUT NOW SCIENTISTS FOR THE WORLD'S LARGEST CHOCOLATIER BELIEVE THEY HAVE STUMBLED ON THE HOLY GRAIL OF CHOCOLATE: A RECIPE THAT IS BOTH MELT-RESISTANT AND LOW-CALORIE.

VULCANO IS THE INTERNAL CODE NAME FOR THE NEW PRODUCT BY THE SWISS CHOCOLATE MANUFACTURER BARRY CALLEBAUT. DEVELOPED IN A LABORATORY UNDER TOP-SECRET CONDITIONS BY AN INTERNATIONAL TEAM OF FOOD ENGINEERS, IT NOT ONLY HAS 90% FEWER CALORIES THAN THE AVERAGE CHOCOLATE PRODUCT, IT IS ALSO HEAT-RESISTANT TO TEMPERATURES OF UP TO 55C (131F). MOST CHOCOLATE STARTS TO MELT AT 30 DEGREES.

THE COMPANY AIMS TO TARGET CALORIE-CONSCIOUS EUROPEAN AND US MARKETS AS WELL AS EMERGING MARKETS IN ASIA AND AFRICA WHERE LOCAL TEMPERATURES HAVE HINDERED THE SPREAD OF CHOCOLATE.

"IT'S CALLED VULCANO BECAUSE IT CAN BE EATEN WHEN IT'S HOT, AND ITS AIRY AND FULL OF BUBBLES, LIKE VOLCANIC ROCK," SAID GABY TSCHOFEN, A SPOKESWOMAN FOR BARRY CALLEBAUT, WHICH ANNUALLY MAKES 1.1M TONNES OF COCOA AND CHOCOLATE-BASED PRODUCTS FOR CUSTOMERS AROUND THE WORLD, INCLUDING CADBURYS AND NESTLÉ.

THE PRODUCT, LIKE SO MANY GOOD INVENTIONS, RESULTED FROM A MISTAKE, THIS TIME BY TECHNICIANS IN THE COMPANY'S LAB WHO WERE WORKING ON ANOTHER INVENTION. "SUDDENLY WE REALISED WE'D PRODUCED A VERY SPECIAL CHOCOLATE, OF A CRISPY, LIGHT CONSISTENCY, LIKE AN AIRY FOAM, AND WE THOUGHT LET'S SEE IF WE CAN DEVELOP THIS FURTHER," FOOD ENGINEER SIMONE CANTZ TOLD SWISS TELEVISION.

UNDER CURRENT PLANS IT COULD BE IN A SHOP NEAR YOU WITHIN TWO YEARS, MEANING AN END TO FINDING A MELTED CHOCOLATEY MESS IN YOUR POCKET ON A HOT DAY OR WORRYING ABOUT YOUR WAISTLINE.

WHILE CHOCOLATIERS HAVE BEEN TRYING TO PRODUCE A LOWER-CALORIE CHOCOLATE FOR YEARS, THE OBSTACLE HAS OFTEN BEEN HOW TO KEEP THE RICH AND LINGERING TASTE AND ENSURING IT IS STILL A PLEASURE TO EAT.

THE US MANUFACTURER HERSHEY BEGAN EXPERIMENTING WITH A MELT-PROOF CHOCOLATE DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR. BUT THE RESULT WAS A VERY HARD BAR THAT WAS NEVER PRODUCED COMMERCIALLY.

TSCHOFEN SAID SHE COULD NOT GIVE AWAY VULCANO'S RECIPE, BUT SHE HAD TRIED IT. "IT'S NICE AND CHOCOLATEY, WITH A STRONG AROMA, AND CRISPY RATHER THAN CREAMY.

"IT DOES MELT IN THE MOUTH, BUT IT IS THE ENZYMES IN SALIVA RATHER THAN THE HEAT OF THE TONGUE THAT CAUSES IT TO DISSOLVE."

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ABROAD

ITALY OKAYS ABORTION PILL

VATICAN SAYS USERS AND DOCTORS WILL BE EXCOMMUNICATED

ITALY'S PHARMACEUTICAL AGENCY AIFA HAS APPROVED THE SO-CALLED ABORTION PILL DESPITE FIERCE OPPOSITION FROM THE VATICAN AND CONSERVATIVE POLITICIANS.

AIFA RULES THAT THE RU486 PILL - NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH THE MORNING AFTER PILL THAT HAS BEEN IN USE IN ITALY SINCE 2000 - CAN BE TAKEN BY WOMEN UP UNTIL THE 49TH DAY OF PREGNANCY UNDER MEDICAL SUPERVISION IN HOSPITAL, OFFERING AN ALTERNATIVE TO SURGICAL ABORTION.

AHEAD OF THE DECISION ON THURSDAY EVENING, THE VATICAN WARNED THAT WOMEN WHO TAKE THE PILL AND DOCTORS WHO PRESCRIBE IT WOULD BE AUTOMATICALLY EXCOMMUNICATED.

PONTIFICAL ACADEMY OF LIFE PRESIDENT EMERITUS MSGR GIULIO SGRECCIA SAID THE PILL ''ISN'T A DRUG BUT A LETHAL POISON'' THAT ALSO THREATENS THE LIVES OF THE WOMEN, POINTING TO 29 CASES WORLDWIDE IN WHICH THE DRUG HAS BEEN LINKED TO DEATHS.

MSGR SCRECCIA SAID THAT SINCE TAKING THE PILL WAS THE SAME AS HAVING A SURGICAL ABORTION, IT CONSTITUTED A ''CRIME AND A SIN IN A MORAL AND JURIDICAL SENSE'' THAT LED TO AUTOMATIC EXCOMMUNICATION FROM THE CATHOLIC CHURCH.

THE GOVERNMENT SAID IT WOULD ASSESS THE AGENCY'S DECISION.

WELFARE UNDERSECRETARY EUGENIA ROCCELLA EXPRESSED CONCERN ABOUT THE SAFETY RISKS FOR WOMEN TAKING THE PILL AND CALLED ON AIFA TO CLARIFY THE SITUATION. ROCCELLA SAID SHE WAS CONCERNED THE GREEN LIGHT FOR THE PILL COULD LEAD TO ''LEGALISED CLANDESTINITY'' WITH WOMEN ABORTING AT HOME SINCE THE EXACT MOMENT OF THE ABORTION AFTER TAKING THE BILL CANNOT BE PREDICTED.

LUCA VOLONTE' OF THE CATHOLIC CENTRIST UDC PARTY SAID THE MOVE SIGNALLED THE BEGINNING OF A ''DANCE OF DEATH WITH PHARMACEUTICAL MULTINATIONALS'', ADDING THAT MAKING THE PILL AVAILABLE ''AS IF IT WERE ASPIRIN'' VIOLATED ITALY'S STRICT ABORTION LAWS.

BUT AIFA'S DECISION WAS HAILED BY MANY WOMEN AND DOCTORS.

''FINALLY! IT'S ABOVE ALL A VICTORY FOR ITALIAN WOMEN, WHO FROM TODAY HAVE MORE CHOICE,'' SAID SILVIO VIALE, A GYNECOLOGIST AND MEMBER OF THE RADICAL PARTY.

SILVANA MURA OF THE OPPOSITION ITALY OF VALUES PARTY HAILED AIFA'S DECISION AS OFFERING WOMEN A ''MUCH LESS INVASIVE'' MEANS OF TERMINATING A PREGNANCY THAN THE SURGICAL METHOD.

MARGHERITA BONIVER OF PREMIER SILVIO BERLUSCONI'S PEOPLE OF FREEDOM PARTY CALLED FOR AN END TO POLEMICS, UNDERLINING THAT THE PILL WAS NOT GOING TO BE SOLD OVER THE COUNTER BUT WOULD BE ADMINISTERED IN HOSPITAL.

ABORTION RATE DROPPING.

RU486, OR MIFEPRISTONE, WAS FIRST INTRODUCED IN FRANCE IN 1988 AND IS NOW USED IN MOST EUROPEAN COUNTRIES INCLUDING GREECE, SPAIN, BELGIUM AND THE UNITED KINGDOM.

IN ITALY THE PILL WILL STILL HAVE TO BE ADMINISTERED WITHIN THE TERMS OF THE ITALIAN ABORTION LAW, WHICH CAME INTO EFFECT IN 1978 AND ALLOWS ABORTIONS UNTIL THE 90TH DAY OF PREGNANCY.

AFTER THIS POINT, TERMINATIONS MAY BE CARRIED OUT ONLY IF THE MOTHER'S HEALTH IS AT RISK OR THE FOETUS IS DEFORMED.

THE RATE OF ABORTIONS IN ITALY HAS BEEN FALLING OVER RECENT YEARS AND IS ONE OF THE LOWEST IN THE WEST.

ACCORDING TO HEALTH MINISTRY FIGURES RELEASED ON WEDNESDAY, THERE WERE 121,406 ABORTIONS IN 2008, A DROP OF 4.1% ON 2007, AND A DECREASE OF 48.3% ON 1982 WHEN THE HIGHEST NUMBER OF CASES, 234,801, WAS RECORDED.

AN ESTIMATED 15,000 ILLEGAL ABORTIONS ARE ALSO CARRIED OUT EACH YEAR.

PRO-CHOICE ACTIVISTS HAVE COMPLAINED THAT A GROWING NUMBER OF PRO-LIFE MEDICAL PRACTITIONERS IS MAKING IT TOUGHER FOR WOMEN TO OBTAIN ABORTIONS.

UNDER ITALIAN LAW, DOCTORS CAN REFUSE TO PERFORM AN ABORTION IF IT RUNS COUNTER TO THEIR PRINCIPLES.

RECENT HEALTH MINISTRY FIGURES SUGGEST THAT 70% OF ALL ITALIAN GYNAECOLOGISTS ARE NOW 'CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTORS' COMPARED TO 58.7% IN 2003 WHILE 50.4% OF ANAESTHETISTS ARE OPPOSED TO ABORTION, COMPARED TO 45.7% IN 2003.

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FAMOUS QUOTES

JONATHON MILLER

I WAS UNABLE TO LOCATE ANY INFORMATION ABOUT JONATHON MILLER.

HERE IS HIS QUOTE:

"IN SOME AWFUL, STRANGE, PARADOXICAL WAY,

ATHEISTS TEND TO TAKE RELIGION MORE SERIOUSLY THAN THE PRACTITIONERS."