Food Safety

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Light on food safety

This article describes the work of the Food Safety Advisory Centre in the United Kingdom.

In 1989 a group of scientists, food specialists and retailers in the United Kingdom, concerned about irresponsible reporting in the media on food safety, set up the Food Safety Advisory Centre with a view to providing balanced information on the subject. Six of the country’s largest retailers undertook to fund this independent body. The Centre is governed by a scientific advisory panel, which is chaired by a professor of food microbiology.

Advice by telephone

The Centre has established a free telephone service providing information on all aspects of food safety. Calls are received from people in all socioeconomic categories throughout the United Kingdom. The volume of calls varies with the degree of public concern. At the height of interest in bovine spongiform encephalopathy or mad cow disease, for instance, some 60 calls were received every day. When no particular issue is predominant, about 30 calls are received daily. The subjects dealt with vary widely, ranging from the preparation of icing for cakes to the risks of infection by Listeria monocytogenes, especially in expectant mothers, the elderly and the young.

Leaflets

The Centre produces leaflets and distributes them both directly and through the six supporting supermarket chains. The first leaflet is entitled The good food safety guide; the second covers food safety more fully and outlines how consumers can help themselves. A third deals with food irradiation, explaining its strengths and weaknesses and what it can and cannot do; this leaflet encourages a balanced debate on the subject. Another leaflet indicates how consumers may judge the safety with which food is handled by retail outlets; it covers chill temperatures, freezer cabinets, and use-by dates. A leaflet on refrigerator and freezer safety is accompanied by a free refrigerator thermometer; advice is given on the avoidance of cross-contamination and food poisoning, particularly during warm

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weather. In response to demand for information on bovine spongiform encephalopathy, the Centre produced a leaflet in 1989 explaining what is known about the disease, indicating the steps being taken to minimize risk to the consumer, and outlining areas of research.

In 1991 the Centre published *Food safety: your questions answered*, a compendium of the answers to questions received by the Centre’s telephone service. This book has been well received by consumers, the food industry and the media, and has been selling rapidly in the United Kingdom’s leading supermarkets.

**Guidance for consumers**

In 1990 the debate on food safety was marred by alarmist and simplistic statements. These have not entirely ceased but the media are now more cautious. Consumers are now being offered information on which rational choices can be based. One problem has been that the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food was established primarily to look after the interests of producers, and has consequently not been credible among consumers as a food ministry or agency. Nevertheless, consumers still expect the government to be the final arbiter on matters of food safety.

A separate food ministry or agency is needed and, in the view of the Centre, it ought to be beyond treasury control and patronage. It would represent the widest possible cross-section of interests and obtain its financial resources and remit from Parliament. Only agencies that are independent of government can be sufficiently credible to act as detached decision-makers. There is a need for a widely-trusted intermediary between producers and consumers. Consumers often feel that government is not doing enough to support research and development.

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Furthermore, it is important to provide adequate resources for the enforcement of laws on food safety. In the United Kingdom the new Food Safety Act goes some way to addressing consumer fears but,
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unfortunately, it does not establish an independent authority.

The emergence of European consumers as a cohesive group has led the Centre to participate in the wider debate on food safety in the European Community. More and more regulations and directives on the subject are emanating from Brussels.

In early 1991 the six major retailers in the United Kingdom were joined in a research relationship by seven of the country’s largest food manufacturers. This has provided the Centre with additional resources for data collection and public interest research.

The Centre seeks to anticipate major issues and to promote rational debate on them in the interests of consumers. Consumers require adequate information if they are to exercise freedom of choice, and the Centre aims to meet this need.

Who does what in spreading foodborne infection?

Responsibility for the application and control of food-handling techniques extends from management to the consumer. However, all people who come into contact with food are not necessarily in a position to transfer pathogenic organisms from themselves to food in such a way that illness might result. Those who present such a risk can be defined as persons whose work involves touching unwrapped foods to be consumed raw or without further cooking or other forms of treatment. This category will include people involved in such activities as the preparation of salads, sandwiches, and cooked foods to be served cold, and the handling of cooked meats and meat products and of certain dairy products, including fresh cream and egg-based foods. In the wider context, workers in water-treatment plants should also be included. Street vendors, common in both developing and industrialized countries, also fall into this group, and may present special problems related to their way of life and difficulties in determining whether they have complied with control measures.

The nature of the work that they are to carry out must be taken into account in the assessment of food handlers and in the training provided to them.