



WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION

EXECUTIVE BOARD
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Food safety

Report by the Secretariat

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

1. A serious burden of foodborne disease exists in both developed and developing countries. Every year thousands of millions of people around the world become sick as a result of consuming contaminated and unsafe food. While the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the United States of America estimate that up to 30% of people in industrialized countries may be affected by foodborne illness each year, it is thought that some 1.7 million children aged 0-15 years die every year as a result of diarrhoea caused by water- or food-borne microorganisms.
2. In recent years the occurrence of serious outbreaks of foodborne diseases on practically every continent has demonstrated both their public health and social significance. Besides the human suffering, the consequences of foodborne illnesses for emerging economies are particularly severe: the burden of disease strains health care systems and affects economic productivity in general, while uncontrolled contamination of foods affects the development of sustainable food-production systems.
3. The bases of effective control of foodborne diseases include obtaining and evaluating information about both hazards in food and the incidence of those diseases. Challenges to a global approach to reducing the burden of foodborne illness include the need for all countries to recognize food safety as a public health issue and to rate it a high priority. The capability of developing countries to control food safety hazards is vital to the objective of reducing the incidence of foodborne disease globally. WHO's proposed food safety strategy will take into account relevant regional strategies and resolutions on food safety adopted by the regional committees.

STRATEGIC-PLANNING MEETING

4. The Fifty-third World Health Assembly, through resolution WHA53.15 in May 2000, recognizing food safety as a priority area, requested the Director-General to convene a strategic-planning meeting of food safety experts. Their advice on global food safety issues would contribute to the formulation of WHO's food safety strategy.
5. The WHO Strategy-Planning Meeting on Food Safety was held in Geneva (20-22 February 2001). The invited experts identified the major food safety issues and recommended strategies to reduce the incidence of foodborne disease. Risk analysis was seen as the appropriate approach towards the identification of food safety hazards and the prioritization of activities aimed at reducing the incidence of foodborne illness. Food safety systems need to be established or upgraded, especially in

the developing countries. The meeting resulted in several recommendations on specific issues, including microbiological and chemical food safety, risk assessment, surveillance of foodborne diseases, and capacity building.

6. The experts recognized that public trust and confidence placed in the Organization by the community made WHO the leader in global food safety initiatives. Even though food safety is high on the agenda of many Member States and international agencies, it is essential that WHO continue to enhance that public health leadership role.

ELABORATION OF THE FOOD SAFETY STRATEGY

7. The conclusions from the strategic-planning meeting have been taken into consideration and, after a broad consultative process, the food safety strategy is being drafted. The strategy will identify directions that could be followed at a global level to attain the goal of reducing the incidence of foodborne disease. It will also identify ways to broaden current strategies, which focus primarily on the hazards in food, to encompass consideration of foodborne risks to human health at all stages of the food production chain, while recognizing the need for sustainable agricultural-production systems in all regions of the world.

8. Some of the main points of the strategy for WHO will be:

- to advocate the prioritization of food safety as an essential public health function;
- to draw up methods to evaluate the burden of foodborne disease and ways to reduce this burden;
- to promote a holistic approach to the elaboration, production and safe use of foods derived from traditional as well as new methods, including biotechnology;
- to formulate and communicate risk-based approaches as the ground for food safety regulation and initiatives along the entire food production chain;
- to prepare new approaches to risk assessments of foodborne hazards in order to provide a sound basis for risk-management decisions;
- to promote international food standards that are based on a reliable assessment of risk and health considerations;
- to define new ways to promote interdisciplinary collaboration in food safety management;
- to build capacity in food safety in all regions, especially in developing countries; and
- to devise novel ways to share food safety experience between countries, with the aim of tailoring regulatory systems and management options to national needs.

ACTION BY THE EXECUTIVE BOARD

9. The Executive Board is invited to note the report.