



*The World's Largest Open Access Agricultural & Applied Economics Digital Library*

**This document is discoverable and free to researchers across the globe due to the work of AgEcon Search.**

**Help ensure our sustainability.**

Give to AgEcon Search

AgEcon Search

<http://ageconsearch.umn.edu>

[aesearch@umn.edu](mailto:aesearch@umn.edu)

*Papers downloaded from **AgEcon Search** may be used for non-commercial purposes and personal study only. No other use, including posting to another Internet site, is permitted without permission from the copyright owner (not AgEcon Search), or as allowed under the provisions of Fair Use, U.S. Copyright Act, Title 17 U.S.C.*

*No endorsement of AgEcon Search or its fundraising activities by the author(s) of the following work or their employer(s) is intended or implied.*



Centre for Agricultural Strategy

# Food safety in the human food chain

STP

Edited by F A Miller

TX

531

.F662x

1990

CAS Paper 20 January 1990

### 3 The consumer's perceptions and responsibilities

Janet Graham

#### INTRODUCTION

I would like to start by thanking the organisers of this conference for inviting me here today to participate in this important conference on food safety.

The National Consumer Council was set up by the government in 1975 and is funded by the Department of Trade and Industry. Although we are funded by the government our independence is enshrined in our Constitution. It is part of our job to identify, protect and promote the interests of consumers in goods and services and much of our work in the past two years has related to food. Our day to day business encompasses that most fragile of commodities – consumer confidence. It is this I wish to talk about today in relation to UK Food Policy.

#### SURVEYS INTO CONSUMER CONCERNS

In 1971 Consumers' Association carried out a survey showing that people in Britain had great faith that the government would not permit harmful food to be sold.

In March this year the NCC published the results of a MORI poll on food safety. 61% of respondents felt it was the government's job to provide clear advice and information on food safety. Nearly one-third said they did not get enough information to be confident that the food they buy is safe to eat. And more than one-half did not have confidence that take-away shops took adequate steps to prevent food becoming contaminated.

There is now an urgent need to restore consumer faith in the safety of the food they are sold.

Recent statistics on food poisoning show that between January and August this year there were 32 273 reported cases. This is 50% up on last year. The catalogue of incidents which have contributed to these figures makes uneasy reading: *Salmonella* in eggs and pâté; *Clostridium botulinum* in hazelnut yoghurt; soft cheeses as well as cook-chill prepared meals which harbour *Listeria*; *Campylobacter* as well as *Salmonella* in chicken; and, most recently, the confirmation of a fact suspected for some time, that certain microwave ovens fail to reach the required temperature to ensure that certain food-borne bacteria in some ready prepared cook-chill meals are eliminated. A combination of too few facts and insufficient guidance has meant that with each incident consumer confidence has ebbed and confusion has flowed.

So the results of our survey do not indicate a hysterical reaction on the part of consumers, as some of the popular press would have us believe, but show an underlying, worrying, but at least partly justified, level of concern about food. This is also confirmed by the calls received initially by the freephone information service Foodline, set up by ASDA, Gateway, Morrison's, Safeway, Sainsbury and Tesco to answer queries concerning food safety. An analysis of these calls revealed that product specific queries dominated, that is questions about the safety of eggs, cheese, poultry and pâté.

In recent weeks polyunsaturated margarine and worries about microwave ovens have been added to the list. There has also been much uncertainty over general safe cooking and storage in the home. It is worth noting that information on how to store food in the home has figured consistently in the list of queries each week since the start of the Foodline scheme.

Food safety has now entered the public arena and become a legitimate area of everyday consumer concern – not just the prerogative of food scientists. It seems hard to believe that until recently the safety aspect of our food was taken for granted by the majority of consumers and the major consumer concerns centred around price, appearance, convenience and taste. These factors remain important but will continue to be over-shadowed until confidence in a safe and wholesome food supply has been restored.

#### THE NCC FOOD CHARTER

In March this year the NCC published a food charter highlighting the seven principles required to restore and maintain consumer confidence in the food supply chain. These are safety, choice, quality, information, redress, accountability and representation.

At the same time we acknowledged that consumers themselves do have a responsibility for food safety. We have never underestimated this. But it has to be said that all the usual safeguards in both domestic and catering kitchens, such as scrupulous hygiene, washing hands before handling food,

keeping fridges at the correct temperature, observing microwave standing times, not re-heating food more than once etc, etc, are to no avail if hidden hazards lurk in the food before it enters the kitchen.

The consumer cannot make food safe which others in the food chain have already allowed to become contaminated by intensive agricultural practices or even malpractices, questionable processing, inadequate storage, or inappropriate transport. Consumers must have the right to enjoy food without anxiety, and should be entitled to believe the food they buy is safe. Most foods are capable of being hazardous to health if improperly handled. The cost of this message not getting through to both producers and consumers is, as we have seen, unacceptably high.

In recent years there have been considerable changes in the methods of agricultural production, food presentation, processing, storage and distribution. Methods of cooking in both commercial and domestic kitchens have altered. These changes clearly affect both the type and number of micro-organisms in food and we believe that more understanding is required about sources of contamination right through the food chain – commencing with feeding practices.

Nothing illustrates this more clearly than the emergence of the new deadly cattle disease bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE). Although Professor Southwood's report (1989) may have allayed our fears as to its implications for humans it has not vanquished them.

The emergence of BSE highlights a more general problem which we – and that is all of us: consumers, producers and manufacturers alike – will have to deal with. Changing methods of production, storage, handling or cooking food entails a risk – a more or less predictable risk which can be evaluated and an unpredictable risk that something totally unexpected will happen. Under these circumstances neither outright rejection of the new process nor bland assurances that 'nothing can go wrong' are acceptable or, indeed, rational. If we are to make the best use of new processes we must develop ways of dealing with the risks involved which are acceptable to all sides.

As modern technology has improved, the choice of food on offer and expectations of food quality have risen. We expect our food to meet high quality standards. But quality is difficult to define and covers many aspects such as taste, variety, freshness and appearance. And to an increasing minority it may mean organically-grown produce. It could be said that it was the perceived injudicious use of pesticides in the past that has been responsible for the renaissance of organically grown food.

The role that pesticides have played in producing the abundant choice and variety of produce now available is not generally appreciated. The benefits they have bestowed are now in danger of being swamped in a list of perceived disbenefits; the pollution of water supplies and possible health hazards to name but two. The emergence of the organic sector strengthens the need for continued scrupulous research and vigilance into the

application of pesticides rather than diminishing it. Again, being realistic, neither the 'no pesticides' nor the 'no problem' position is viable and, indeed, taking up either position is, in the long run, likely to be counter-productive.

Our research has shown, both in the UK and the EEC, that consumers are willing to pay for a choice of healthy and safe food, but they will not pay for food which they perceive, rightly or wrongly, may threaten their long-term health or is of poor standard. Lack of *information* is the oxygen of suspicion. Clear, accurate, consistent and reliable information is essential to enable consumers to make an informed and rational choice about the food they buy. This applies not only to labelling but may apply to methods of production.

The public should be helped to ask the right questions about hazards and the assessment of hazards as well as the monitoring of hazards. In addition, information on nutritional value will increase in importance as the links between diet and disease continue to emerge.

We also believe that much food-borne illness could be prevented by a national hygiene education programme, as MAFF have suggested, from school level upwards on the safe storage, handling and cooking of food. This has been sadly lacking from the school curriculum for some time.

**Representation** goes hand in hand with **accountability**. A mechanism must be found to enable the views of consumers to be properly represented to government and there should be strong representation on all those committees concerned with advice, policy, priorities and strategies involved with food production both in the UK and the EEC. Consumers should know the basis on which decisions about food safety are reached. It is our view that this single step, more than any other, would help to regenerate some of the confidence in the food chain which has been eroded.

We now live in an increasing reactive society, some might say over reactive. This, coupled with a thirst for information, poses food scientists and food manufacturers a new set of questions when launching a new method of food production or a novel food. First and foremost will the new technique or product be accepted? Many of the new food production techniques have been invented to suit the manufacturer or seller of the food rather than the consumer. This is now starting to backfire.

Consumer acceptance of a product can no longer be guaranteed by assurances from those who exert the checks and balances on a product that a particular practice is safe. One has only to look at consumer reaction to Bovine somatotropin (BST) or irradiation to confirm this. Consumer perceptions resemble a set of free radicals which, if not eliminated at an early stage, will shut the doors on reason.

Consumer acceptance of new products and techniques is essential if the potential benefits of food science and technology, in particular with the advent of biotechnology, are not to be lost. In the future this may call for a new strategy for preventive forward planning incorporating both education and cooperation.

Redress is high on our agenda in several other fields as well as food. In the food field we find it difficult to understand how consumers can be expected to regain confidence in food while primary producers are able to deny any responsibility for the food they produce should it be found to be unsafe. Consumers need access to redress if the food they buy proves faulty or misdescribed, or if through no fault of their own they suffer loss or injury from unsafe food.

During the *Salmonella* affair we found it unjust that the government was prepared to compensate the egg industry for destroying their flocks but the unfortunate victims were unable to claim redress. This led us to the conclusion that the exemption that exists for primary producers from strict liability for their produce should be lifted.

#### PLEA FOR AN INDEPENDENT REGULATORY FOOD AGENCY

NCC believes that the framework for protecting and promoting the consumer principles I have referred to must be set up by government. One cannot blame producers for playing by the rules if the rules themselves are at fault. We wish to see the setting up of an independent regulatory food agency in the UK responsible for testing, monitoring and evaluating food safety. Consumers cannot be expected to be confident in the safety of their food unless it is endorsed expertly and independently by those without a vested interest in its sale.

An independent regulatory agency would be the keystone in a coherent food and nutrition policy which ensures firstly that the consumer interest is properly served and secondly that each part of the food chain has clearly defined responsibilities and practicable targets, which will restore consumer confidence in food safety.

#### LEGISLATION

Finally a word about the impending Food Bill. I would like to congratulate the Minister on his announcement in the House of Commons on 27 July 1989 that he was sending out a questionnaire which would be used to assess the resources and the people necessary to implement the Bill and to find out the best way to ensure that resources are available. We regard the provisions for enforcement as the cornerstone of the Bill and without adequate funds it will not fulfill its purpose.

We recognise that legislation alone cannot ensure that our food is as safe as we would wish it to be. It can only lay down a framework for monitoring such things as microbiological hazards, natural toxins, environmental contaminants and radionucleides at various points in the production and

distribution chain. Nevertheless the role of the new Food Bill is clear. It must be seen primarily as an instrument that is capable of restoring, instilling and maintaining a greater confidence in the food on sale whether in the shops or the catering industry.

#### REFERENCES

Southwood, R, Esptein, M A, Martin, W B & Walton, J (1989) Report of the Working Party on bovine spongiform encephalopathy. London: HMSO.