

Eat and Be Merry, Unless Your Food is Toxic - Policy Issues on Food Safety¹

Don't be too sure that if you eat, you be merry. Some of them unfortunately end up in hospital beds, or worse, in the haven of eternal rest.

Thousands get poisoned each day throughout the world as innocent-looking and enticing foods find their way from the farm to the stomach. But why is this so?

Salmonellosis

Unseen by the naked eye, Salmonellosis bacteria sneak their way to the human stomach by contaminating

raw meat, eggs, unpasteurized milk and cheese products.²

Found everywhere in the food chain and in the environment, salmonella-infected patients may experience mild or severe diarrhea, fever and occasionally vomiting. Bloodstream infections can be quite serious, particularly in the very young or elderly.

Not only salmonella, but also other elements infect the food that we eat.

Othman (2005), Vice Chair of Codex Alimentarius Commission, says

that it is important to reduce loss in human life and suffering by preventing and controlling food-borne diseases.

Food safety then, in the Southeast Asian context, is a great challenge with the following policy issues to be considered:

- Information gathering and analysis of scientific information - are essential elements of a food safety system, particularly for the identification, evaluation of potential food hazards and institut-





ing control measures including establishing food safety levels. “Risk analysis provides such a framework for governments to effectively assess, manage, and communicate food safety risks with the help of other relevant stakeholders. Admittedly, however, many Southeast Asian countries still lack the capability to do this;”

- Food Inspection Programs – these can be made more effective if “efforts among relevant agencies are well coordinated in developing an integrated systematic approach to ensure resources such as manpower and finance are utilized in a coordinated manner to achieve optimal results. Relevant fees may be imposed for implementing food safety measures based on the principal of beneficiary pays”.
- Food Control Laboratories – a sufficient number of adequately equipped trained laboratories and trained analysts using ac-

ceptable analytical methodologies are required to support the monitoring, compliance and enforcement activities. The overall quality of the work of the laboratory should be addressed by implementation of an analytical quality assurance system that meets international standards. “Due to the advancement in analytical technology, the limit of detection for prohibited substances has progressively been lowered over the years. And these requirements for lower detection of prohibited compound have been created tremendous challenges on Southeast Asian countries to re-orientate and upgrade their laboratories facilities at considerable cost”.

- Educating and Training people – the ultimate risk management goal of food safety regulators is the control or reduction of food-borne hazards and in turn, reduction in the incidence of food-borne illness. “One of the

risk management strategies if for governments to aggressively educate and train food handlers, producers and consumers on food safety”.

- Food legislation - there are still some critical areas of the food chain such as feed, import/export and hygiene that are still not adequately covered by appropriate regulatory laws; thus, the need for them to be instituted at the national level. “There is a need to involve all relevant stakeholders in the standard-setting process.”

As policy makers address these issues, we can perhaps be made more sure that when we eat, we can end up being merry, *indeed*. (Lorna C. Malicsi, KMU).

¹ Some issues were taken from the presentation made by Ms. Noraini during the Regional Consultative Workshop on “Emerging Issues and Policy Responses on Food Safety” sponsored by SEARCA and TROPMED last October 2005 in Bangkok, Thailand.

² http://www.health.state.ny.us/nysdoh/communicable_diseases/en/salmon.htm.