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We Pasteurize Milk: Should Similar Protection Be Mandated For Other Foods?

One of the recurring discussion topics of this column is food safety. In a recent column, we talked about imported honey. At other times we have talked about melamine in chocolates and wheat gluten, ethylene glycol in toothpaste, and e. coli in beef and field-grown vegetables.

This week we want to look at Salmonella in peanut paste and peanut butter used in commercial settings. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has reported a genetic match between the Salmonella found in a batch of peanut butter at an institution in Minnesota and the strain of Salmonella that has caused illnesses in Minnesota and other states.

As a result "the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is conducting a very active and dynamic investigation into the source of the Salmonella Typhimurium outbreak. At this time, the FDA has traced a source of Salmonella Typhimurium contamination to a plant owned by Peanut Corporation of America (PCA), which manufactures both peanut butter that is institutionally served in such settings as long-term care facilities and cafeterias, and peanut paste – a concentrated product consisting of ground, roasted peanuts – that is distributed to food manufacturers to be used as an ingredient in many commercially produced products including cakes, cookies, crackers, candies, cereal and ice cream" (http://www.fda.gov/oc/opacom/hottopics/salmonellatyph.html).

As a result of the finding, PCA voluntarily recalled all peanut butter produced on or after August 8, 2008, and all peanut paste produced on or after September 26, 2008, in its Blakely, Ga., plant because of potential Salmonella contamination.

PCA's products are not sold to the public but are marketed to food manufacturers and institutional settings with the products sold in containers ranging from 5 pound buckets to tanker loads.

In addition to institutions removing the product from their inventory, a number of national and regional firms have issued recalls of some of their products that might have been contaminated by the PCA products. For the latest recall information, consumers are urged to check the FDA website cited earlier in this article.

According to an Associated Press report by Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar that was published on Sunday, January 18, 2009, "so far, more than 470 people have gotten sick in 43 states, and at least 90 had to be hospitalized. At least six deaths are being blamed on the outbreak."

The recall has been met with modest indifference with newspapers in unaffected areas consigning it to inside pages, if they print it at all.

Given the frequency of these events we want to raise several issues of public policy.

First, we are sure that the public wouldn't react with modest indifference if 6 people had died of bird flu. But because Salmonella is a common pathogen that causes food contamination on a regular basis, the public response is minimal. Clearly, known risks are taken far more casually than exotic or unknown risks.

Some would suggest that these deaths were unnecessary. After all, we have the means at hand to eliminate Salmonella, e. coli, and other biologically based food borne pathogens – irradiation. At the present time irradiation has been taken off the table as a means of preventing many of these pathogens in our food supply because of the potential for public outcry.

We have read the rationale of the opponents of irradiation: it would allow food processors to lower their sanitation standards and it may cause slight changes – whose long-term effects are unknown – in molecules in the irradiated food.

No consumer wants food sanitation standards to be adjusted downward because of the use of irradiation, or for any other reason. Such lowering of sanitation standards need not be, and should not be, allowed.

Consider milk pasteurization. As any Grade A milk producer or processor can attest, the pasteurization of milk is only one aspect of the sanitation protocol for handling and processing milk.

Under no stretch of imagination is milk pasteurization a cover for lax sanitation practices. Systems would need to be set up so the same would be true for irradiation

Among the things that can be said about irradiation are that irradiation a) does not result in any radioactive properties in the irradiated food, b) has been approved by a long set of studies, and c) can prevent a vast number of illnesses and the deaths of a lesser, but significant, number of the young, old – the most vulnerable populations – and those in between.

At what time does food-borne related deaths become more than an issue of personal preference? When does it become a matter of public health policy? When does the public insist on well-tested and effective measures to prevent these deaths?

Second, at the present time, the authority for assuring the safety of our food supply is divided among a number of federal agencies, primarily the USDA and the FDA. There are historical reasons for this division but now it often boils down to turf-protection by the several agencies.

When do we begin to consider the safety of our food supply and the effectiveness of making one agency responsible for ensuring that all of what we eat is safe from all contaminants, both chemical and biological?

Perhaps food safety needs to be separated from drug approval and all of the food safety activities of both the FDA and the USDA combined into a new agency with a clear focus. That agency should be given the statutory authority to set and enforce uniform food safety rules and protocols.

Third, it seems strange to us that much of our food safety depends upon voluntary recalls. We have read the legal and administrative reasons for this strategy, but they still come up lacking in our mind. When public safety is at stake, does it not make sense to allow public authorities to institute a recall instead of depending on companies to institute the action?

Occasionally food-borne illness incidents rise to the point that they garner the attention of the public, but an examination of the recall records at the USDA and the FDA, indicated that food-borne illnesses occur frequently.

While we have one of the best food safety systems in the world, there is no reason why we can't make it better. Δ