

Watching What You Eat

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SAFE FOOD

Bacteria, Biotechnology, And Bioterrorism

By Marion Nestle

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On June 21, 2000, Jeannie Hillery and Tom Quadros, compliance officers with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service, made an unannounced visit to the Santos Linguisa Factory, a family-owned sausage plant in San Leandro, Calif. They were accompanied by Bill Shaline and Earl Willis, California state inspectors. The plant had shut down voluntarily the previous year after being cited for violations, but the owner, Stuart Alexander, wasn't happy. He had posted a sign complaining of government harassment.

Now the plant seemed to be up and running, illegally. It had neither federal nor state permits. The inspectors were wary. Quadros called into say that Alexander wasn't around. He arrived soon afterward. Two more calls were made: one by Alexander to ask the police to throw the inspectors out; one by the inspectors, asking for help. The police, considering it a non-emergency, didn't respond.

Within 18 minutes Hillery, Quadros and Shaline were dead, killed in a fusillade of 20 shots. Willis was fired at as he fled the premises. Alexander was arrested and charged with murder.

Marion Nestle mentions this incident in *Safe Food*, along with a number of others in which meat inspectors have been harassed or threatened. Food safety is serious business. It is serious for the inspectors trying to do their jobs in an often hostile atmosphere. It is serious for those who have suffered grave illness or even death from contaminated food. It is serious for consumers in a rapidly changing food world where it is increasingly difficult to know whom or what to trust. And it is serious for the heads of food companies who can find themselves entangled in a maze of seemingly arbitrary and capricious regulations, who cannot understand why processes that have worked well for generations are now deemed unsafe, and who feel pressured from all sides in a highly competitive environment where holding down costs is often the primary goal.

The events at Santos Linguisa were horrifying and tragic, but to those familiar with the tensions and conflicts surrounding food safety, they were not entirely unexpected. Food safety is a battleground. It should not be. In extending sympathy to the family and friends of the victims, Catherine Woteki, then the USDA's undersecretary for food safety, added that after speaking with the meat and poultry industry, she had reminded them that it was "time to lower the rhetoric on food safety issues and to find a way to work together to resolve these issues."

There is nothing more important than food. Beyond its nutritional necessity, it is a substance loaded with history, memory and cultural meaning. Eating is the most intimate of acts: What we eat becomes a part of our bodies. Trust -- that food suppliers and government regulatory agencies are doing their jobs -- is vital in taking that first bite.

Complacency about food safety -- encouraged by unsupported government claims that America has "the safest food in the world" and industry-fostered assumptions that plastic-wrapped means contamination-free -- prevailed for much of the second half of the last century. That complacency has been unsettled in recent years with increasing reports of unfamiliar pathogens causing widespread outbreaks of serious and sometimes fatal disease.

The culprit is our changing relationship to food. How food is produced and how we consume it have shifted dramatically in a generation or two. Today, food is seldom "grown" or "raised" in the traditional sense but more often than not "produced" by systems that are centralized, industrialized and globalized. While these large systems would seem to have the potential for efficient microbial controls, mass production, processing and distribution can also mean massive, hard-to-detect outbreaks when something goes wrong. Food producers want efficiency and profit; consumers want novelty, availability, convenience and low prices. Food safety can get squeezed between these competing goals. Nor should the challenges of producing safe food from live animals and soil-grown plants be underestimated.

Nevertheless, says Nestle, many in the meat industry seem determined to avoid regulation and inspection, to evade detection and to deny responsibility for microbial contamination. Congress, awash in generous campaign contributions, appears willing, all too often, to give them what they want. Behind every massive recall are federal agencies with confusing and overlapping lines of responsibility, whose goals are conflicted and whose hands are often tied. To traditional concerns about contamination we can now add worries about what biotechnologists are doing to our foods and what bioterrorists want to do to our foods.

Nestle tackles it all, with admirable thoroughness but an overly pedagogical prose style. Nevertheless, she quite rightly identifies the establishment of a single food-safety agency as the most important first step in tackling the increasingly complex problems surrounding the issue. The United States also needs to adopt Europe's "precautionary principle," which puts the onus on the food industry to demonstrate that a new product is safe rather than on consumers to prove (with their bodies, apparently) that it is not.

The title of the book, however, is a mistake. There is no such thing as safe food -- risk is inherent in eating, and there are no guaranteed quick fixes for contamination of raw foods. Nestle seems not entirely aware of the complexity of that problem. There is only "safer food," and that requires reasonable expectations, an understanding of the changing nature of foodborne disease, cooperation, dedication, vigilance and a revitalized respect on the part of everyone, including consumers, for what we eat and how we eat it. •

