

Editorial

Food safety in the Eastern Mediterranean Region: time to act

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Unsafe food is linked to the deaths of an estimated 2 million people annually – many of whom are children (1). World Health Day 2015 in April focuses on food safety under the slogan “From farm to plate, make food safe” in order to draw attention to the importance of this issue, particularly in view of the global nature of food production and supply, and highlight the need for everybody to play a role in ensuring food safety: governments, manufacturers, retailers and the public.

An effective food safety system requires several elements in place: updated food safety laws and regulations, food standards and control management, effective food inspection and enforcement services, food monitoring and surveillance systems with adequate laboratory resources, foodborne disease surveillance systems, food safety education and training, and timely information and communications (2–5).

Development of an interdisciplinary approach with direct interaction between monitoring, surveillance and risk analysis systems can improve foodborne disease prevention. Such preventive efforts need to cover the entire food production chain, from farm to plate, recognizing that the critical point for efficient prevention might be at the farm level for some problems or elsewhere in the food chain for others. Most current food safety systems have not been designed according to this important principle (3,4,6). Furthermore,

a lack of coherence and consistency often undermine the efficiency and effect of food safety systems (6)

In order to build and maintain effective food safety systems, strong links must be established between all sectors that have a bearing on food safety, including public health, agriculture and fishery, consumer and school education, science and research, tourism, trade, industry, and regulatory authorities. It is the public health sector that needs to take the lead in building this community of stakeholders and sharing common goals and responsibilities. The key players need to have access to reliable and up-to-date information so that timely collective action can be taken (6,7).

Countries of the Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMR) have undergone rapid urbanization and changes in lifestyle and consumer demands. These changes have had a profound effect on food production, supply, availability and consumption. As food supply becomes increasingly globalized, consumer demand for a wider variety of foods has grown, importation of food has increased, and new food products, ingredients and additives are regularly entering the market. Additionally, there is far greater consumption than before of food outside of the home – in restaurants, fast food outlets and street vendors – and increased advertising and promotion of food products and convenience foods (2–4,7).

Food safety programmes in the Region therefore need to take into account all these developments and trends in food production, supply and consumption and adopt a holistic approach to the entire food production chain from farm to plate. The lack of a holistic approach is one of the greatest current challenges to food safety in the Region (3,4,7).

Many countries in the EMR face challenges in responding appropriately to the needs for provision of safe food, particularly in the absence of strong consumer protection bodies and organized consumer interest groups. Most Member States of the Region lack policies guiding the transportation of food (2,3,7). The safety of ready-to-eat food from street vendors and similar public food outlets is an important issue (2,7). For example, inspection of restaurants may be applied unevenly and cover major cities only and not rural areas (8,9). The same standards are not always applied to control the safety of locally produced and imported food (5,7,8,10), and there is a lack of training, infrastructure allocation and proper licensing and control (7,9). Although steps have been taken to improve food safety systems in the Region, more work needs to be done.

Recognition of the problems has spurred a new wave of solutions, such as creating a single agency to deal with food, e.g. Food and Drug Authorities in some Member States of the Region.

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However, these solutions cannot be realized without the active support of all those involved in the food production and consumption chain. There is an urgent need for more risk-based integrated

national systems for food safety to reduce risks of both microbiological and chemical foodborne diseases (3,6).

Food safety is a major and urgent challenge in the 21st century and one

that has to be tackled for the protection of human health. Governments in the Region must face up to the task and lead the way. Now is the time for action.

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