

8-12-11 Safety, Security and Salmonella

Health agents need to stay in touch with food establishments, including their menu and practices, such as hot and cold holding. Every person or establishment serving food to the public, in exchange for money, needs to be permitted. Even when a non-profit sells food, I meet the person in charge and we talk about the menu and what to set up for a safe event, such as a hand washing station and we talk about the location and the hours of operation. I don't charge anything for the permit for non-profit organizations. Have you ever wondered why we go through all this bother?

Some people have the idea that us "government types", no matter how small, only care about collecting a fee for that permit. One such person was the man I reminded, for the second time, that he did not have a permit for his ice cream truck and he was to cease and desist from the practice in "my town" until he was permitted. The man has greasy dirty hands, and was not using safe serving practices the first time I met him a year earlier. I was less tolerant the second time and decided to find out if he even had a hawkers and peddlers license. (He did not.) As he drove away, he was yelling all kinds of obscenities at me, along with his claim that us "government people are all alike! You only care about the money, money, money!" He even claimed, "You're on the take, aren't you?! That's how people get their permit! They give you money!"

Whew! What we put up with.

Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, even though I worry about food safety and even though I can see the point when people say that our country is becoming too regulated; I can't help but be impressed and thankful at our country's food security. Food security is not only about protecting our food from terrorist plots and interventions; it is about safety for all.

I receive food recalls on almost a daily basis. That is disturbing but I would rather know than not know. Most recalls are handled quickly and efficiently and without harm. Others are more involved and take a toll, including loss of lives, before it is solved. When it comes to such culprits as E. coli or Salmonella, there is more than one type and it can take a long time before the source is discovered. "Finger printing" or serotyping the contaminant is crucially important to discovering the source and to increasing the chances of successfully treating the victims of food poisoning. The ongoing Salmonella outbreak from ground turkey is one such case.

I first read of possible Salmonella contamination in Jennie-O frozen turkey back in April. At that time, the investigation began with one reported case by the Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services of a case of salmonellosis caused by the serotype Hadar (also known

as Salmonella Heidelberg). Knowing the type of Salmonella helped officials to identify other cases linked to the same source.

The investigation was quiet for a while and recently resurfaced with 78 people affected in 26 states and one known death attributed to this outbreak.

Unfortunately, this particular strain of Salmonella is known to be resistant to antibiotics. All the more important it is for us, the consumers, to protect ourselves from food borne illness with proper handling of food and the importance of seeking medical attention when this illness is suspected. If you think you are suffering from salmonellosis with such symptoms as diarrhea, fever and cramps, please ask your doctor to test for the cause rather than just treat the symptoms. Discovery saves lives.

Prevention also saves lives. Wash and sanitize hands, cutting boards, counters and other surfaces in contact with raw meat and poultry before continuing with preparing the meat. Cook the poultry to 165 degrees in the center. Ground meat is one of the most dangerous foods there are, as bacteria on the outside is pulled to the center and stays there. A whole steak that is not pierced can be safely eaten with a rare center because the outside was cooked. The fact that it is a whole muscle protects the center.

What is at the center of your life? We don't need a permit to be safe. We do need to be informed.

Be safe.

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for Halifax, MA. You can tell her your food stories (for free!) at 781 293 6768 or cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us You can learn more about the current salmonella outbreak at <http://www.cdc.gov/salmonella/heidelberg/index.html>