

CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S REPORT: OCTOBER 2008

Melamine in Chinese Milk Powder

1. In the last few weeks action has been taken by food authorities around the world following the tragic events in China associated with the adulteration of milk with melamine.
2. Melamine, an industrial chemical used in the production of plastic had been added to lower quality milk to give the impression of higher protein content. According to reports from the WHO more than 54,000 infants and young children in China have sought medical treatment in relation to the melamine-contaminated dairy products in China, causing kidney stones. Three deaths among infants have been confirmed. It was already the case that imports of milk and milk products from China to the EU are not permitted.
3. The infant formula manufacturers in the UK have assured the Agency that all of the mainstream formula on the market in the UK does not use milk or any milk ingredients from China. This comprises over 98% of the infant formula and follow-on formula available on the UK market.
4. The European Food Safety Authority has established a tolerable daily intake for melamine of 0.5 mg/kg body weight.
5. On 26 September the European Commission adopted Commission Decision 2008/757/EC which requires any products from China containing more than 15% of milk products as an ingredient, and any products where the percentage of milk product content cannot be established, to be subjected to documentary, identity and physical checks, including laboratory analysis. Any product found to have a melamine content exceeding 2.5 mg/kg final product should be removed from the market and destroyed. The decision explicitly prohibits the import of infant formula containing milk or milk products from China.
6. Port Health Authorities have been notified of the Commission Decision on 26 September. Relevant consignments will be detained pending receipt of laboratory test results. Any product containing over 2.5 mg/kg of melamine will be detained and destroyed without delay.
7. Local Authorities have also been asked to take samples of other potentially contaminated products already on the market.

8. On 1 and 2 October the Agency was notified via the Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF) that two products, Koala cookies and white rabbit sweets containing melamine had been distributed to the United Kingdom. Based on the levels of melamine found in the products affected it has been estimated that a child (20 kg) would need to eat 15 kg of Koala cookies or approximately 500g of white rabbit sweets per week to exceed the safe level established by EFSA. Independent experts have advised that the risk to health is likely to be very low and therefore we are advising consumers that they do not need to take any action.
9. Local Authorities have been asked to remove the identified product from any retail premises. The Agency's website has been updated to reflect this action and an e-mail enquiry box has been set up and publicised for any concerned consumers to contact the Agency.
10. Sampling by Local Authorities is still underway and, pending analytical results, it is possible that more products may be required to be withdrawn from sale.
11. The Agency continues to monitor products identified in other countries as contaminated via intelligence from INFOSAN, other international partners, and from the UK industry associations.
12. Due to fast developing nature of this incident I will provide a verbal update to the Board at our meeting

Explanation of differences between UK Countries in the percentage of premises not granted full approval during the VMHA Approval visit

13. At the September Board meeting I undertook to report back to the Board as to why there had been a higher number of establishments in England that had not been given full approval at the first inspection visit when compared to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

14. The following table describes the approvals performance by country.

	No. of premises	Approved at first visit
England	508	24%
Wales	51	55%
Scotland	96	32%
Northern Ireland	52	40%

15. In England approvals are granted by the Veterinary Director on the recommendations of veterinarians of MHVD. In SWANI approvals are granted by Directors on recommendations from veterinarians of the Rural affairs Departments.
16. The higher percentage of establishments granted full approval at the first visit in Scotland and Northern Ireland was as anticipated, due to their history of meeting the higher standards required for export prior to the single market. In 1994 50% of Scottish red meat slaughterhouses and 94% of Northern Irish slaughterhouses were approved for export compared to 16% and 15% of English and Welsh premises.
17. The variance between England and Wales appears to be due to different approaches being taken. In Wales the level of resource available allowed extensive advisory input prior to the first approval visits, which were not carried out until MHS had advised that premises were largely compliant. In England, due to the number of premises requiring approval, advisory visits were limited to the least compliant premises.
18. This apparent inconsistency of approach is incompatible with our own principles and will now be the subject of further review by the Executive Board.

Counterfeit Spar Imperial Vodka

19. In early September, analysis by Agency officials of intelligence gathered through our national Food Fraud Database led police, customs, trading standards and environmental health officers to raid four premises in the London Borough of Haringey, where over a thousand bottles of potentially dangerous counterfeit vodka were seized and two individuals were arrested. As part of the multi-Agency operation, a further five articulated lorry loads of suspected illegal wines and spirits, with an approximate value of £250,000, were seized by officers from Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs. The investigation is continuing.
20. The Agency first became aware of counterfeit Spar Imperial Vodka being on sale in the UK when public analysis tests revealed that it contained potentially harmful levels of methanol, which could have serious health effects, including blindness, if consumed in large quantities. The Agency published a food alert to local authorities across the UK, advising food enforcement officers that they should seize all counterfeit Imperial Vodka where it was found on sale and forward intelligence reports of such finds to the Agency for inclusion on its Food Fraud Database. Once entered on to the database, analysis of these intelligence reports enabled Agency officials to identify the premises in Haringey as a supplier of the counterfeit vodka.
21. The operation is an excellent example of the success in the use of the Agency's Food Fraud Database in instigating a multi-Agency investigation into illegal activity.

South Wales E.coli Public Inquiry

22. September 2005 saw the largest ever outbreak of *E. coli* O157 in Wales and the second largest in the UK. The outbreak affected more than 150 people, most of whom were children in 44 schools across four local authority areas. Thirty one people were admitted to hospital and tragically, five year old Mason Jones died. The National Assembly for Wales subsequently established an independent *E.coli* Public Inquiry to undertake a thorough investigation into the outbreak.
23. The Inquiry's terms of reference are "to inquire into the circumstances that led to the outbreak of *E.coli* O157 infection in South Wales in September 2005, and into the handling of the outbreak; and to consider the implications for the future and make recommendations accordingly". The work of the Public Inquiry continues.
24. Professor Hugh Pennington, chair of the Public Inquiry, said at the public hearing of oral closing submissions on 14 May 2008 that the Inquiry was at that time seeking further material relating to the performance and functions of the Meat Hygiene Service. He noted that a further short oral hearing may be required to deal with that material. We provided the requested additional material on 20 June. We learnt on 26 September that Professor Pennington has considered the further material that we provided and has decided that he does not need to hold a further hearing.

Nutrition Labelling

Independent Signpost Labelling Evaluation

25. This independent study has already explored and recently reported on how people actually use Front of Pack (FOP) labels and work to test how well consumers understand each of the labels is now underway. The aim of this important research is to identify which elements of the labels are most effective in helping consumers to make healthier choices.
26. The first, qualitative, phase of the independent signposting evaluation study, which considered how consumers use front of pack labels when in a retail environment and at home, and explored whether having more than one scheme causes confusion, has been completed.
27. Last month the Project Management Panel published a series of papers, welcomed by the Agency, which detail the scientific basis for the quantitative phase of the research to test label comprehension with 3,000 UK shoppers; and initial insights from the qualitative work already undertaken to understand consumer use of the labels.

28. From the research carried out so far it is clear that consumers want, and welcome, front of pack signpost labels that tell them about the nutritional content of food sold through retail outlets, and that they use them to help decide what foods to buy. The research also suggests that there are some areas of confusion associated with the use of colours, GDAs and portion sizes in the various schemes. These matters will be explored fully in the quantitative study.

29. The final research report is due to be published next spring, following peer-review.

Stakeholder Engagement in Signposting Policy Work

30. The Agency is hosting a stakeholder meeting on 13 October to begin the process of engaging stakeholders on how the findings from independent signpost labelling evaluation research will be translated into policy advice to Ministers. The meeting will provide an opportunity for all parties to consider what a single approach might mean in practice, identify any information other than the research which should inform the consultation package and feed into the impact assessment. The Board is expected to consider its advice to Ministers in autumn 2009. I will add further comments on this session for Board members at our meeting.

Working with Local Authority Stakeholders

Food Allergy Training

31. On 18 September, the Agency started offering on-line training, available via food.gov.uk, to local authority food law enforcement officers (both food hygiene and food standards) and others, such as managers and staff in the manufacturing and catering industries, wanting to learn more about food allergy. The project management and delivery of the on-line training is a good example of cross-Agency working.

32. We facilitate the provision of low cost training, which included the Food Allergy Workshops, for enforcement officers across England. This particular workshop has always been popular with enforcement officers and was frequently oversubscribed.

33. The basis for developing the online training was primarily driven by enforcement officers' request for more training on allergen management. This would enable them to encourage allergen management awareness in small food businesses during regular food safety inspections to help to reduce the number of food allergy incidents.

34. The training is available online and is free to enforcement officers and food business operators (FBOs). This is of particular benefit to FBOs who cannot afford the time or money to undertake off-site training. It allows the user to work through the modules at and time and pace that best suits them. The training has been designed to cover allergen management in both the factory and catering settings, and includes a resource area that provides background on the law, best practice guidance and checklists.
35. Enforcement officers and business can also use the site as a source of reference, for example legislative changes, and as a refresher. Providing the food allergy training online has captured a wider audience (European and International), is cost effective and sustainable – no paper materials or travelling are required.
36. Other training packages are now being considered for development as an e-learning package, using this as a model.

Pilot and Launch of Nutritional and Healthy Eating Course

37. The Agency have procured the services of Lynn Stockley Associates Ltd to develop and deliver six Healthy Eating and Nutrition courses to local authority enforcement officers across England during 2008/2009. The first course will be held on 25 November and be hosted by East Northamptonshire Council.
38. The objective of the course is to provide enforcement officers with a good understanding of the principles of a healthy diet and of some of the public health challenges caused by the current diets of UK consumers. It provides a background understanding of the Agency's work, with its partners, focussing on a range of stakeholder groups to improve diet in the UK. The course focuses in particular on the Agency's priorities for engagement with the food industry and with individual businesses – and offers insights on how the businesses that enforcement officers visit routinely can contribute to the Agency's work by making it easier for their customers to make healthier choices.

Lessons Learnt from Recent Hospital-Based Listeria Outbreak in Northern Ireland

39. In June of this year, FSANI was notified of a Listeriosis outbreak associated with two hospitals in Belfast. The eight cases notified all had underlying medical conditions and three of the patients died.
40. Detailed investigations were carried out by Environmental Health Officers (EHOs) into the two hospitals catering facilities and the distribution chain of chilled ready to eat foods. FSANI co-ordinated the investigation of food manufacturers and

distributors across 11 district council areas. FSANI also worked closely with the Food Safety Authority of Ireland in relation to a company manufacturing in the Republic of Ireland (RoI).

41. At the end of September, FSANI facilitated a workshop for EHOs responsible for food law enforcement in all hospitals in NI. The workshop was an opportunity for EHOs directly involved in the investigations to share intelligence and lessons learned.
42. The workshop included presentations on the timeline of the outbreak, the investigation of hospital catering facilities, procurement issues, difficulties in obtaining food histories and the investigation of the manufacturing and distribution businesses of food supplied to the hospitals.
43. The workshop concluded with EHOs agreeing to visit all hospital and large healthcare homes across NI to challenge their food safety HACCP systems to ensure that there is robust implementation of controls on Listeriosis. A follow up meeting to discuss the findings from these visits is to be arranged early 2009.

Business Interchange Programme

44. As part of the Agency's aspiration to become a World Class Regulator we have organised a programme of business secondments. This is in its early stages and has been based around an overarching interchange strategy which was designed after examining good practice from other schemes.
45. The outcome we want from this particular programme is that staff gain a practical understanding into how the Agency's policies are applied in food businesses and an insight into some of the problems they face regarding food regulation and compliance. It is also hoped that the information and skills FSA staff gain during their secondment will help the Agency develop better, smarter regulatory interventions. We hope that they will return to the Agency and share their experience with their colleagues and present recommendations about how we might improve the way we engage with businesses during the policy making process.
46. We have had a very good initial response with ten businesses agreeing to host a secondment. Three companies were also invited and have given presentations to approximately 120 staff from across the Agency on their views about how the Agency's work impacts on their businesses. Three further presentations are planned over the next four months.
47. The types of secondment range from a two-week itinerary of interesting visits to a period of several months. The key element is flexibility to suit both parties' required

outcomes. We have also had interest in two-way interchanges where the Agency is the host.

48. To date, three staff have been found placements in two businesses and during their secondments they will have the opportunity to:

- meet a wide range of people including technical experts and company leaders;
- visit production lines and discuss the sourcing and mixture of ingredients into products;
- look at quality assurance operating stages including allergen control and metal detection;
- understand how new products are developed and marketed taking into account existing and emerging food law; and
- Consider how food producers are using FSA's nutritional advice to influence their food production.

49. The secondment arrangements are flexible and we want to make sure that the experience is useful for the business as well as the Agency. Part of the process also involves an introductory planning meeting to make sure that the experience is a good one. The secondments are advertised to all of our staff so cover a wide variety of backgrounds and disciplines including policy experts, scientists and environmental health officers.

50. We short-list the best candidates through an interview selection process and then introduce them to the business host. The secondment programme has also been met with enthusiasm from the Director General of the Food and Drink Federation Melanie Leech who said in a speech at the New Regulatory Reform Agenda Conference 2008 that she is "delighted" that the secondments are starting to happen.

51. It is vital that we use the experience from these industry arrangements to provide similar secondments with NGOs particularly those which are set up to represent consumers.

Tim J Smith
Chief Executive