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Safe Meat: There Is a Better Way

By ACSH Staff — August 26, 1997

Last week's unprecedented recall of 25 million pounds of beef contaminated with the disease-causing *Escherichia coli* bacteria tells us a good deal about the futility of demanding zero risk in our food supply.The ensuing media frenzy tells us even more about America's naivete concerning food production.

But even more importantly, this incident highlights our government's refusal to allow an efficient, safe technology that could safeguard against food- borne disease: pasteurization, through irradiation. Instead of endorsing this technology to solve the problem once and for all, Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman responded to the meat recall with calls for more federal regulatory authorityincluding power "to order recalls and impose civil fines" on meat processors suspected of breaking regulations.

Mr. Glickman is clearly playing to "consumer advocates" who demand that our meat supply be 100% pathogen-free. The agriculture secretary is apparently unaware that there is no way to completely eliminate potentially life-threatening bacteria from our food. Bacteria such as E. coli live in the intestines of animals; once it's slaughtered, all meat is at risk of contamination. Between 2% and 5% of all beef contains various strains of E. coli that can survive both refrigeration and freezing. About 1% contains the extremely virulent type that has recently sickened more than a dozen people in Colorado, leading to the closing of the Hudson Foods factory in Columbus, Neb., and Burger King's decision to drop Hudson as a supplier.

So far Hudson has blamed the E. coli contamination on its slaughterhouses, because it is in slaughtering that the bacteria is spread to meat. Federal investigators have blamed the practice of "reworking"blending the previous day's beef residues into the next day's supplyin the Hudson case. But this practice is common. If carried out with appropriate attention to sanitation and temperature control, "reworking"is safe and acceptable. The primary responsibility for avoiding food-borne illness still lies with consumers and commercial food preparersnot with the government.

Burger King's action, meanwhile, is impossible to explain in scientific terms. Burger King flame-broils its meat under automated conditions in which the temperature always exceeds l55 degreesa level at which E. coli cannot survive. The company's fulminations about E. coli are thus pure public relations: To quote its press release, the meat recall was an "extremely cautionary measure." The Miami-based restaurant chain has taken out full-page newspaper ads congratulating itself for severing ties to Hudson Foods, even though Burger King knows that Hudson's beef never posed a risk to Burger King customers or staff.

We should be concerned when such emotional responses lead to destroying millions of pounds of meat that, if cooked properly, would be safe. How can we avoid such incidents in the future? It is highly impractical to perform routine laboratory analysis on all raw meat to identify bacteria. The

Agriculture Department already has more than 7,000 inspectors visually examining more than 120 million carcasses each year to keep obviously diseased meat from going to market. But the measures now in place cannot prevent all contaminationand most consumers would not wish to pay the tremendous cost of running every one of the nation's meat-packing plants under the "operating-room conditions" activists demand.

The most safe and effective means of killing food-borne pathogens is through irradiation, the use of ionizing energy. Once raw meat is pasteurized by irradiation at a high enough level, life-threatening bacteria such as E. coli are eliminated. Irradiation does not change the taste or quality of food in any way; it simply kills the germs that cause disease.

Already, irradiation is used to sterilize most of the sterile disposable medical devices used in the U.S. And the same technique is used to treat such foods as onions, fish, wheat, cereal grains and spices in more than 40 other countries. Japan alone irradiates 15,000 to 20,000 tons of potatoes each year to inhibit spoilage due to sprouting. The most common complaint about irradiation, that it makes food radioactive, is simply false. Irradiation makes food radioactive no more than a dental X-ray makes teeth radioactive.

The U.S. government has approved the use of irradiation on pork, to control trichina, and on poultry, to curb salmonella. But its approval for beef has been held up at the Food and Drug Administration for more than three years. Progress has been slow because antitechnology advocatesincluding Sidney Wolfe's Health Research Group, which is affiliated with Ralph Nader's Public Citizen; Michael Jacobson's Center for Science in the Public Interest; and Michael Colby's Food and Waterare circulating unfounded claims that irradiation poses: a health hazard. Food producers thus fear that consumers will reject irradiated products. Yet none of these groups can point to reliable scientific evidence supporting their contentions.

If we are serious about avoiding future cases of food-borne illness and death as well as such significant food waste, it is time for all of us to stop responding to the scaremongers. We must listen, instead, to scientists, who are unanimous in their conclusion that food irradiationnot more government regulationwill make America's food supply even safer.
