

Editorial

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The human food chain is diverse and at times complicated. In its simplest form it comprises gathering wild foods and hunting wild animals. In most parts of the world the hunter-gather way of life has not existed for many thousands of years and there are few locations in today's world where it can truly be said to still exist. The domestication of plants and animals marked our transition from hunter to farmer and laid the foundation for the way that we produce and process food in present times.

From the moment we became more sedentary in our ways we began to explore means by which we could preserve food surpluses for later consumption, commonly when the natural seasons dictated that food supplies would change or be depleted. Early on in the domestication of food crops the storage of wheat and other grains was effected by digging large pits, filling them with grain and sealing them to prevent losses to pests during storage and to limit their natural deterioration. Around the same time we learned that modification of the harvested product, principally through drying, could prolong the storage life of the product.

Just how big an issue that food safety was during those long-ago periods is hard to know. Archaeological investigation and historical records certainly reveal that some of the issues that we are still trying to deal with today were present in earlier times. What has perhaps changed dramatically is the increased global nature of trading. Wheat and other grains have always been traded over considerable distances but today those distances are larger and the quantities of material far greater as the world's population has increased.

In addition, the speed and nature of modern communications has made the exchange of information more rapid and one would hope more effective. In grain trading we can get relevant quality information before the product even sets off on its journey to the end user or processor. This is good news but far more likely to travel faster is bad news so that food quality and safety problems frequently reach public awareness in a matter of minutes and the repercussions can be significant on a global scale.

Even with our ever increasingly sophisticated investigative and analytical powers food quality and safety issues are a regular occurrence and we need to remain as vigilant as ever. Some of the problems come from unfortunate coincidences and a limited number from dubious practices. A significant number of problems come from a lack of knowledge as to what conditions will compromise the safety of crops and foods. This makes the assembly and dissemination of relevant knowledge a high priority.

Key to dissemination is the delivery of the relevant knowledge in a readily assimilated form. The dissemination of knowledge through scientific journals is relevant to researchers but just as important is the adaptation of the critical information into more easily understood forms for use by the primary producers and handlers of primary crops at the local level. Perhaps this is something we should give more attention to the international grains community if we are to reduce the level of food safety and quality fears and incidents.

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