

Editorial

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Hardly a week passes by without issues of food safety, nutrition and health making the headlines in the popular media. One of the immediately recent issues was of course the outbreak of *Escherichia coli* associated with bean sprouts being grown in Germany. This led to demands in some parts of the world for all food products of German origin to be removed from the shelves of retailers. An over-reaction? Perhaps so, since the early recognition of the problem was clouded with a degree of uncertainty as to the precise origins of the problem.

With modern telecommunications being 'immediate' it is only a matter of seconds for the news of such outbreaks to spread around the world. This is in contrast with the harvesting, manufacture and distribution of food products, which in many cases are measured in days and a few weeks. This can mean that products manufactured some time before the onset of a food safety issue become tagged with the same 'unsafe' label. Indeed the reaction to remove all food products of German origin ignored even more basic facts that the outbreak (serious that it was) appeared to be linked with fresh (short shelf-life) produce. The (over-)reaction of some retailers was understandable, they do not want to be involved in any way with food-poisoning issues, especially ones which may lead to their lack of awareness being exposed in the popular media.

Once again the importance of communication for those of us involved in assessing and ensuring food safety has been highlighted. Once again the challenge for scientists to communicate factual information to the modern media in terms that they and the average consumer can understand has been

brought into sharp focus. There are hundreds of food safety stories reported in the popular media each year and how many of these leave you bewildered by the lack of grasp of even the most basic of facts, let alone the distortions and sensationalism often involved. You know the sort of thing 'the worst case since 2008'. Does this mean that things are getting worse or that things were worse before 2008? The problem is that with food safety issues we are always dealing with the statistics of small numbers so in our hypothetical case the one outbreak since 2008 is bound to be the worst case.

I have commented before on our need as scientists to improve the nature of our communications with consumers, equally I see that we have a need to improve our communications with the popular media. I would also add that we need to contribute to the education of consumers and contributors to the popular media. These tasks will not be easy but we should not give up trying.

On a more positive communications note let me draw your attention to two ICC events in 2012, both focussed on eastern shores. Early in 2012 we will be involved in our first symposium meeting in India while in August the 14th ICC Cereals and Bread Congress will be held in Beijing, China (see Calendar of Events for more details). These will be excellent occasions for us to communicate with one another and perhaps a good occasion to talk about how scientists communicate with the rest of the world's population.

Stanley P. Cauvain
Co-editor in Chief
spc@baketran.demon.co.uk