

IS YOUR FOOD CONTROL PROGRAM WORKING?¹

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PROGRAM EFFECTIVENESS VARIES

The title of this paper makes two assumptions. First, that some food control programs are working poorly, and secondly, that others are productive and are doing well. As one studies food control across the nation, this is just about the case.

Normally, one is not interested in poor programs unless there are lessons to be learned. These lessons usually are negative and largely involve errors to be avoided. However, as a point of contrast and to emphasize effective elements of good programs, which will be discussed later, let us consider some factors on the debit side of the ledger. One of the first is the failure on the part of some public health and other officials at the administrative level to realize and recognize the total food control problem. Let me cite an example. One Eastern state has so ignored and forgotten food sanitation that there are hundreds of recreational camps, hotels and summer resorts which never have had a detailed survey of their food service facilities. This is a state quite well noted for progressive approaches toward other environmental and preventive medical problems, yet for about a decade there has existed a notable lack of leadership in this important area at the State level. Because there is lack of leadership and direction from the State, local programs too are suffering. As a consequence food control, in a large part, is a token service if it is a service at all.

In another city, with a population of about half a million the health officer confided that he would hesitate to eat in any of the local food service establishments because his department was saddled with a staff of inept political appointees protected by a politically controlled system¹.

For nearly two decades many of us with a deep interest in the public health value of sound food control have been saying over and over again, *Our annual reported figures on outbreaks and cases of food poisoning are so incomplete that they do not begin to approximate the true and actual situation.* To substantiate this statement, look at these facts. In the

compilation of statistics relative to food borne outbreaks for the year 1958, ten states reported not a single outbreak. Then, consider this. Two of our most populous states, the first having a population of fourteen million and the second with ten million reported in the same order for 1958, 17 outbreaks and 747 cases and 130 outbreaks and 3758 cases, respectively. In other words, the state with four million less people reported about eight times as many outbreaks and approximately five times as many cases as did the more populous state. When some of our larger cities are considered the situation is no better. For example, four large mid-western cities with a combined population of nearly four million, reported no outbreaks or cases in 1958. One large city in the southwest, with a population of about 700,000 has not reported a single outbreak of food poisoning since 1951². This situation is, of course, entirely unrealistic and further substantiates the fact that national figures do not represent the true condition.

It is realized that the reporting of food borne outbreaks does not necessarily stamp a program as good or poor. On the other hand, in the case of the two states cited above, one has a mediocre program at best, while the other is making a sincere effort to master its food sanitation problems. However, it can be said categorically that a strong effective program of food control is generally in operation where there is prompt epidemiological study of outbreaks and a careful recording of the facts. It is hardly necessary to point out that the effective program seeks out these facts, takes remedial action, puts preventive sanitation into play to the end that there will not be a re-occurrence of the misfortune.

I assume that at this point you are in general agreement with the thesis, that too many food control programs are weak and badly in need of re-vitalizing. However, before proceeding to consider some of the elements of a vital and productive program, let us look at the scope of the food service industry in terms of gross national product. More than 17 billion dollars are spent annually on meals consumed outside the home. The food service industry is said to rank fourth among all of the industries of the nation. Estimates indicate some seventy to eighty million meals are consumed daily in one or more of our many types of food and drink establishments. Americans today

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eat about one out of four meals away from home. A hundred years ago the ratio was 1 in 200. Forty thousand drug stores offer soda fountain, luncheonette, or meal service and are heavily patronized. In the category of restaurants, cafeterias, snack bars, sandwich shops and the like there are believed to be about 200,000. A further enumeration would be redundant. Suffice it is to say, this is a big business and it is growing bigger. I question very seriously whether our control agencies are growing with the problem. I am concerned that in some places horse and buggy methods are being used in the jet age.

SOME ESSENTIALS OF GOOD FOOD CONTROL

Now, let us examine some of the elements that make for a good program. This is not too easy to do adequately in the time allotted, but some of the points which appear to be most significant will be discussed.

First and foremost, the administrative head of the health department must have some important attributes. He must know what food control is, and must recognize the importance and place of it in the total community health program. He must preserve the stability of the activity by giving it his unqualified support. Since the large majority of public health administrators are men with medical backgrounds, it is quite understandable that food control may not hold as much appeal as *maternal and child health*, *nursing*, or *communicable disease control*. However, the proficient health officer sees all of the various activities in *proper perspective*. This is what is desired. Unfortunately, due to a number of reasons which need not be enumerated here, some look upon food control as a sort of a step-child; one of those routine activities that has to be carried on. Too frequently maintenance of the *status quo* seems to be the prevailing attitude. Of course this results in stagnation because only minimums are met or urgent problems are simply ignored. When a health administrator takes active interest in food control this interest is reflected in the effort and work of his staff. Contrariwise, lack of interest and leadership results in a program that simply drifts on a sea of indecision.

Now, having advanced the thesis that administrative leadership is a prime requisite, let us explore this point further. Here one moves to the operating level. In state departments, in large county units and in municipalities, food control is commonly administered by a division director. What kind of person should he be? As a principle qualification he should be a college graduate with a bachelor's degree in biological or sanitary science. If he has earned a graduate degree this is of course another asset, but in my judgment, it cannot be considered a substitute

for several years of successful experience in a good health agency as a staff worker in the field of environmental sanitation. Let it be said with emphasis at this point, that a person with these qualifications should receive a salary commensurate with his ability and responsibility. There is a great deal of talk about the trained sanitary scientist and the yet unknown environmental problems of the future. There is too little talk about good salaries to attract high grade people. The current problem of recruitment would be greatly eased if the salary situation were improved.

In addition to educational qualifications and experience, he must be a person who has administrative capacity, the ability to plan and direct a program, supervise staff employees and recognize new needs as technological changes come about. Finally, he must be able to work with the food industries which come under his supervision. More and more in the regulatory field we see the real need for close working relationships with key people in industry. When amicable relationships are developed, progress is greatly enhanced and the well qualified program director utilizes this important asset.

With leadership such as I have enumerated, it follows that staff sanitarians should be equally capable of carrying on their work in an effective manner. It is axiomatic that if there is good direction and leadership at the top, staff workers will reflect these qualities and a progressive administration will result.

GOOD OPERATIONAL PROCEDURES NEEDED

Now, in the time remaining, I would like to outline some other essentials of good food control. Before doing this however, let us consider briefly the prime objective of such a program. The main purpose is to prevent human injury from infected or contaminated food. The term food as used here also includes drink. This injury may manifest itself in the form of communicable disease, food poisonings, or food intoxication. Harmful preservatives and toxic chemical compounds may get into food from a number of sources. These may cause illness and even death. Food may contain foreign and extraneous matter which makes it unfit for human consumption. These are elementary facts well known to people in the food control field, but these are basic and they bear repetition. I mention them because the first essential of a successful food control program is careful surveillance of the food itself.

A good program then gives close and critical scrutiny to the community food supply. Questions such as the following must be asked. How was the food processed and transported? How was it stored? What unusual conditions may have surrounded its hand-

ling? Was its sanitary quality and wholesomeness impaired? I repeat, *a good program looks at food with a critical eye*. It attempts to eliminate all conditions and circumstances that might despoil it. This is fundamental because in every food law or regulation each stipulation is aimed at surrounding food with every reasonable safeguard.

Another important quality in a good control program is the use of the laboratory. Too frequently about the only sampling that is done is after an outbreak occurs. As far as epidemiological studies are concerned this is entirely proper. While it must be done to determine the possible cause and to institute remedial measures, it is a bit like, "locking the barn after the horse is stolen". What we need to find out is more about the sanitary quality of food before anything happens and as it is offered to the consumer. To do this, food sampling should be instituted. Random sampling can be very revealing when used as a fact finding measure.

This type of recommendation usually brings forth the remark, "but we have no bacteriological standards to go by". This is true, but it doesn't take very long to differentiate between a total count of one hundred thousand organisms per gram and one of ten million. What foods should be sampled? To begin with, select the most perishable types. Sample those that are known to support the rapid and progressive growth of microorganisms. Choose those that are most frequently indicted as the vehicle in food borne outbreaks. Some that might well be selected are hamburger, beef and chicken pot pies, sandwich fillings such as ham, egg and tuna fish salad, creamed poultry, baked ham, gravies, stuffings, creamed sauces and soft custard filled pastries and pies. It may be found, if a hypothetical example may be used, that the bacteria count on chicken pot pies from establishment "A" is fifty thousand per gram, while at establishment "B" the count is five hundred thousand. This immediately poses the question, *What is establishment "A" doing that "B" apparently is not doing?* If a series of samples are taken and high counts result it is then imperative that the most exacting study be made to determine the cause.

It is not the purpose of this paper to list all the details which obviously are involved in the random sampling of food, *but it is the purpose of this paper* to indicate that such a program, when executed with judgement and tempered with good sense, can disclose some significant facts that physical inspection alone generally will not reveal. I am sure at this point that it is clear that I am a strong advocate of food inspection as an entity in itself and not just as an adjunct to establishment inspection.

EVALUATION HIGHLY IMPORTANT

A third important element in a well administered operation is stock taking or evaluation. For example, how did 1958 compare with 1957? Were there fewer defects in food service establishments in 1958 than there were in 1957? What defects appear to re-occur more frequently than others? Is emphasis placed upon factors of greatest sanitary significance? Just counting the number of inspections in a given period of time does not give answers to these questions. Measuring things *quantitatively* is one thing, but measuring them *qualitatively* is quite another. How can these qualitative facts be gathered? One way to do it is to tabulate defects from field inspections sheets. List, in tabular form, the more important items and determine for a six months or an annual period how many times they have been defected. It may be found, for example, that refrigeration has been checked as deficient in ten per cent of all establishments inspected. This would show the need to concentrate more effort on this facility. Perhaps three or six months later a similar review will disclose refrigeration deficiencies now running at six per cent. This is a *qualitative* measure. In this instance it shows definite improvement in refrigeration. By the same token it can show lack of progress or reveal sanitation items that remain static. What is advocated, as can be seen, is an analytical approach. With this type of evaluation the division director deals with concrete facts and can plan his program more intelligently. He can point out that defects in certain areas of food service operation seem to persist; that more effort is needed in a given direction. As a consequence, field inspection will become more meaningful and corrections will be made more promptly. With the present emphasis on getting the most from the tax dollar, unit costs, and the efficient use of man power, attention needs to be directed toward a *measure of accomplishment* rather than just a measure of effort. Our basic objective is to bring about beneficial changes in the food establishment environment rather than to make a given number of inspections. (3)

SOME GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations previously made have been quite specific and have included some suggestions for expediting them. Now some recommendations of a more general nature will be made. Those that follow have been found effective in a good many places. They will be listed numerically but not necessarily in the order of greatest importance.

1. Conduct in-service staff training. One of the common complaints by industry is the lack of uniformity in the interpretation of food ordinance requirements. If the division director interprets

- a requirement one way and the field staff another, a confused situation results. The place to debate ordinance interpretations and to arrive at a decision is within the confines of the department, not among food service operators.
2. Observe and study trends. Today the drive-in restaurant, the roadside cafe and drive-in theatre may serve more patrons than many downtown establishments. Industrial and other catering service is currently on the increase, so commissary inspections in this branch of the industry may need to be stepped up. Food and beverage vending is at an all time high and at present continues to show signs of increasing. The vending of meals is here, but it is just in its infancy. Mobile food units have been in use for some time but they too need careful scrutiny. In other words, know where food volume business is heaviest and adjust activities to meet it.
 3. Consider the supervision of non-commercial establishments. If private clubs are not now included, they certainly should be. Employee feeding facilities in banks, insurance companies, department stores and within similar commercial enterprises comprise a sizable segment of the food industry. They should be within the framework of the food control program.
 4. Churches, fraternal orders and educational institutions need to be considered. In many large centers, meal volume in these places is amazingly high. Obviously, in the case of these institutions, and with religious affiliated institutions in particular, the approach must be of the educational and consultative type. One sure way to stir up emotional tensions in a community is to use dictatorial methods in the regulation of these highly regarded community institutions. Work in this area is being done quite successfully in a number of places, so the recommendation is not just academic.
 5. Enlist the cooperation of industry. A whole discourse could be given on this one recommendation. Suffice it is to say, that key people in the food service industry have a great deal to contribute to the efficient and effective operation of official control. This is a reality in a number of state and local jurisdictions and its outstanding success has been demonstrated time and time again.

SUMMARY

There is still much unfinished business in food control. The magnitude of the problems should be recognized. This paper has discussed some of the elements of a successful program and has pointed up some of the avenues of approach that may and should be used.

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