

Raising food-safety standards

Peter Middleton

COMMENT



As a result of the 'world's worst ever' listeriosis outbreak earlier this year, Tiger Brands has completely shut down four of its plants: the Value Added Meat Product facility in Pretoria; the Enterprise Foods factories in Polokwane and Germiston; and its Clayville abattoir.

There have been 978 cases of listeriosis and over 200 confirmed deaths across the country. The source has been traced back to polony made at the Enterprise Foods factory in Polokwane – the other Tiger plants having been shut down for "precautionary measures" while the company grapples with root causes and consequences.

"While all facilities have halted production, our people are at work assisting with various other functions within the factories, predominantly related to deep-cleaning protocols and routine hygiene activities that are still required for food production facilities," said Tiger Brands spokesperson Nevashnee Naicker.

To date, the outbreak has officially cost the company R415.2-million, which does not include trading losses or potential litigations settlements – and the factories are not expected to reopen before October, 2018.

Also affected is the local pork industry. 'The People First Piggery in the gritty South African mining city of Rustenburg used to slaughter 150 pigs each month. It's now down to zero,' reads a June article on *Fin24*, which goes on to report that the industry has cut at least 2 000 jobs, pork prices have dropped to four-year lows (down 40%) and small farmers are at risk of closing down.

Although the listeriosis outbreak is undoubtedly tragic, I find it remarkable that the 'worst ever' tag can be applied to the case. I found an article published in 2013 entitled '10 Worst Food Contamination Incidents Ever' which lists a 1974 incident involving wheat contaminated with charmac seeds in Afghanistan as the worst. Over two years, this led to around 1 600 deaths and affected up to 7 800 people in total. A reoccurrence in 2008 killed a further ten people – which has got to be much less forgivable.

Completing the worst 10 list are: mustard oil contamination in Delhi (1998); toxic alcohol in Bengal (2011); dried milk poisoning and mercury poisoning in Japan (1955 and 1956); a melamine-contaminated powdered baby milk scandal in China (2008); Aflatoxin-contaminated maize (2004); imported grain (from the US and Mexico) contaminated with a mercury-based fungicide in Iraq (1971); arsenic contaminated beer in England (1900); and toxic oil syndrome in Spain (1981).

Here we have ten 'random' causes of contamination tragedies, listeriosis being an 11th, and the list does not offer any easy way to predict the next incident.

Tiger Brands CEO, Lawrence MacDougall, is currently calling a food safety council to be set up and for the government to establish new safety standards. "In a post listeriosis environment, you would probably have hoped there were industry standards and that the department of health and industry was collaborating closer to keep pace with developments in the industry and within immune deficient individuals," he told *City Press*' Justin Brown.

MacDougall is calling for a change in the current standard, which sets limits of less than 100 colony-forming units (cfus) of viable bacteria per 100 grams of product. Less than 10 cfus in 25 grams of product is the next step up, but MacDougall points out that, internationally, Canada, Australia and New Zealand are suggesting that this number should have to be achieved "at the end of the shelf life for that particular product, not during production".

After the horse has bolted, perhaps, but it is good to see a food-industry captain championing improved standards.

In this issue, we include a food-processing feature in which Afrox's Hendrik Pretorius talks about how consumer demand is driving the food industry towards offering fresher and healthier food products. This is changing food packaging and the entire cold chain, where it is now possible to safely package and preserve fresh food for much longer and to transport it directly to supermarkets from farms and abattoirs. While Afrox's contribution is in the development of gas atmospheres that best prevent the deterioration of different food products, Pretorius acknowledges that it is the power of the consumer that is driving food producers towards healthier and safer options.

Perhaps a South African food contamination incident was inevitable and Tiger Brands' Polokwane factory was a random weakest link. But let's not limit the solution to cleaning up one company.

We must all raise our standards: at farms, packaging plants; transport depots; in trucks; at abattoirs; and at all of our food and beverage processing plants.

And as consumers, we should be more proactive in keeping our food safety officers and all of the beneficiaries of our supermarket-spend more accountable, by insisting on transparency and favouring those that place food safety standards and our health above profit. □

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