

Food counterfeiting, contamination outpace international regulatory systems

February 16 2009

Intentionally contaminated Chinese milk killed several children and sickened 300,000 more, causing concern around an increasingly connected world economy. Demand for inexpensive products virtually guarantees future repeats of food adulteration and counterfeiting from overseas, Michigan State University researchers said, as trade volumes overwhelm regulatory oversight.

Nobody can guarantee safe food, said Ewen Todd, but governments need to improve controls by promoting increased corporate responsibility, identifying vulnerabilities and assessing risks. Todd, a professor of advertising, public relations and retailing, conducted a symposium on the safety of imported food today at the American Association for the Advancement of Science annual meeting held in Chicago.

Increasing risk-based inspections and sampling; improving the detection of food system signals that indicate contamination; improving immediate response to contamination events; and improving risk communication all should be part of a more stringent regimen, Todd said.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration inspects less than 2 percent of the food coming into the country, while 13 percent of America's food is imported, Todd said.

"It's a worldwide trend. First of all, transportation is easier, trade is easier," he said, while consumers are increasingly well traveled and have higher expectations. "We want stuff in the winter when we can't grow

it."

Between the extremes of accidentally contaminated food and terrorism via intentional contamination lies the counterfeiter, seeking not to harm but to hide the act for profit. The melamine incidents are such examples. As an industrial chemical that mimics protein content in tests was added to milk and subsequently created kidney problems for children.

Product counterfeiting is the focus of a presentation by John Spink, an instructor at the National Food Safety and Toxicology Center and director of the Packaging for Food and Product Protection (P-FAPP) initiative, both at MSU. He is developing a criminal justice program focused on food counterfeiting.

"We take a risk-based approach to analyze where the gaps are and look closer at where there is a higher reward for fraud," he said.

"Counterfeiting goes back to Roman times, when French wine had a seal of Roman origin," he said. "Products are moving around the world so fast now that there's more opportunity for fraud. When food was distributed more regionally, there was less potential for large-scale fraud, or outbreaks of any kind."

Recent instances of counterfeiting or contamination include conventionally grown vegetables sold as organic; fish sold as a more premium species; milk and pet food adulterated with melamine; catfish containing banned antibiotics; toothpaste contaminated with diethylene glycol (a base chemical in antifreeze); and canned energy drinks of unknown origin labeled with brand names.

Pharmaceutical counterfeiting has attracted most of regulators' attention until recently, he said, but those companies are required to report adverse affects or similar problems, while food companies and other

manufacturers are not.

"At MSU, our approach to anti-counterfeiting strategy is extremely interdisciplinary to address the many aspects of the risk," Spink said, including public health communication, supply chain and packaging security. "Overall, we take a holistic, strategic perspective on the human element that led an individual to perceive an opportunity and then act — this perspective is led by criminal justice, social anthropology and basic business economics. Of course other important disciplines are intellectual property rights law, food law, medicine, nursing, public health, international trade, psychology, consumer behavior, retailing, management, economics and business."

MSU's international experience also gives it a valuable perspective by understanding source country economies and cultures, Spink said.

Also participating in the forum were presenters from the FDA and Cargill Inc., representing regulatory and corporate perspectives.

Source: Michigan State University

Citation: Food counterfeiting, contamination outpace international regulatory systems (2009, February 16) retrieved 4 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2009-02-food-counterfeiting-contamination-outpace-international.html>

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