

CONFERENCE ON FOOD SAFETY EDUCATION

Thinking Globally—Working Locally: A Conference
on Food Safety Education
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FOOD SAFETY EDUCATION—THE VICTIM'S PERSPECTIVE **Nancy Donley**

I appreciate the opportunity of speaking to you all today. Five years ago I gave a talk entitled "What Consumers Want From Educators" at this same conference in Washington, DC. After re-living with you all the horrific details of my 6-year-old son's battle and defeat by E. coli O157:H7 poisoning I made the comment that what consumers want from educators is THE TRUTH. Don't sugarcoat the message; give it to us straight. I still stand by that today.

But don't worry, I'm not going to give you the same speech I gave back in 1997. What I will attempt to do is share with you the insights and the successes and failures of food safety and food safety education, from S.T.O.P.'s perspective; from the perspective of the victim.

As an aside, it's really rather bittersweet for me to be here in Orlando. Alex was saving up for a trip to Disney World before he died. He had a 5-gallon water jug that we would all throw our change into and from time to time, Mom and Dad would add in a \$10 or \$20 bill.

For those of you unacquainted with S.T.O.P., allow me to give a brief description of our organization. We originated out of the 1993 E. coli O157:H7 epidemic from contaminated fast food hamburgers. More than 700 people were sickened, and at least 4 children died in that outbreak. Our members have had very real, very personal encounters with food poisoning from a variety of pathogens. Many of us have watched helplessly in horror while a cherished family member lost the fight and died a brutal death from "something he ate". We're not finger pointers at S.T.O.P. We call ourselves "actionists" because we actively work with government and industry at developing stronger programs to prevent the needless tragedies that have befallen our loved ones. We look forward to working with Dr. McKee who arrives as the FSIS Administrator with a background in public health. We have been advocating for years the need for public health backgrounds within FSIS because who is better equipped to formulate policies that will carry out the mission to protect public health and safety than a public health specialist? Before Dr. McKee had to leave, I offered S.T.O.P.'s commitment and cooperation in working with him in enhancing and developing regulatory programs that will strengthen the safety of our country's meat and poultry supply.

I venture to say that everyone in this room has probably had at least one bout of foodborne illness in their lifetime. And I'll further venture that some of you have gotten sick from contaminated food SINCE you've been working as food safety experts. What overwhelms me is that the most knowledgeable people, the most educated consumers, and I'm talking about YOU, can and will continue to get sick

because EDUCATION IS NOT THE ANSWER TO THE PROBLEM OF FOOD POISONING. The PROBLEM is that harmful pathogens are allowed—and yes I mean that when I say “allowed”—to contaminate food and be shipped to our grocery stores, restaurants and institutions while we tout our food supply as the safest in the world. The ANSWER is to keep these pathogens out of our food to begin with. I’d like to share with you the story of Sue Doneth, a S.T.O.P. member and former board member. Sue joined us after her 10-year-old daughter, Lindsay, got Hepatitis A from strawberries served through her school lunch program. Lindsay was hospitalized and was quite sick but fortunately recovered. Sue actively worked on policy issues with S.T.O.P. and was all too familiar with my son’s story and the stories of too many others who did not survive their foodborne illnesses. Sue could recite in her sleep cooking temperatures, cross-contamination avoidances, etc, etc.

Well lightning struck the Doneth household a second time. This time, it was 13-year-old Sara who came down with E. coli O157:H7 poisoning which went into the death spiral of hemolytic uremic syndrome. Thank God Sara did survive but it was very unclear for an eternity for her family whether she would or not. Here’s a classic example of a failure of education in protecting an “expert’s family” family from a life-threatening illness and is just one of hundreds of actual stories that we at S.T.O.P. have been personally involved with.

Now let me reassure you that S.T.O.P. definitely believes that there is a role for food safety education. We have just hired Susan Grooters, who is here with me today, as S.T.O.P.’s Education and Outreach Coordination. This in itself is testimony to our commitment to food safety education. However, what we vehemently disagree with is the size of that role and the assertion by some in industry and in government that it’s the consumer’s responsibility to make sure that their food is safe, and if you get sick, it’s your own fault. Last time I checked, nowhere on any of my groceries or on restaurant menus was the warning, BUYER BEWARE!

Let me repeat, consumer education is important but cannot be made to be THE factor in reducing foodborne illness and deaths. It is the least effective and most expensive strategy in protecting public health. Education without behavior modification is useless. And you have heard that people want to eat it the way they want even after being told it isn’t safe. It’s human nature to believe that disasters happen to other people and “not me”. That’s why people continue to smoke or ride motorcycles without a helmet.

We also face the enormous challenge of being a multi-cultural, multi-lingual society. My husband’s favorite German restaurant serves steak tartar. The owner & staff know of our son’s death from E. coli contaminated ground beef but still continue to serve it to their large European clientele. How do we reach ALL groups evenly and effectively? The costs would be enormous.

I have stated numerous times that the whole food safety continuum—from farm to fork—should be examined under a HACCP system. What are the hazards, where are the insertion points, where do we place interventions, etc. The very beginning of the continuum—the farm or animal level—is an area that currently has very little if any, regulation. Pathogenic organisms such as O157, Salmonella, Campylobacter originate HERE in the animal. Yet we do nothing at controlling for these organisms on the farm BEFORE the animal enters a slaughter house or its manure is used to fertilize crops. This is a serious oversight. The next step is to do a risk assessment and cost/benefit analysis. I think we’d all agree that focusing at the END of the chain, on consumer education, does not make sense and would certainly not be the most effective way of protecting public health.

Here's some observations and feedback from our members and hotline calls that I'd like to share with you:

1. There's a problem of mixed messages being sent to the public.

S.T.O.P. has received hundreds of calls from victims saying that they didn't know that food could be unsafe because they have repeatedly heard that "we have the safest food in the world". They question the need for prevention strategies for what is perceived as a non-existent problem.

In the cases of recalls, consumers are advised, typically in a news story, that it's OK to eat the product as long as "you cook it right". The interpretation is that "it must not be THAT bad or they'd tell us not to eat it at all". This type of "education" is particularly dangerous because it overlooks the issue of cross-contamination completely. Many reporters just pick up whatever is on the press release. We have a responsibility to give the entire picture and not just a partial view and to not lead to a sense of false security in an effort to prevent panic.

Another example of being fed mixed messages is the "cook your hamburger to 160 degrees and be sure to use a meat thermometer" and then walking into a restaurant and being asked how they'd like their burger cooked. Again, the public justifiably questions the need to go to the bother of using a thermometer to test their burgers if restaurants seem to have the assurance that they can serve it to their clientele anyway they want it. Interestingly, we have been asked if the reason for this is that restaurants have different suppliers than grocery stores who get safer meat. And we still haven't beaten the "pink" message yet although I do want to applaud FSIS for consistently printing the temperature requirements in their press releases and literature.

We like Thermy's motto of "It's safe to bite when the temperature's right" but we don't like the Fight Bac motto of "Keep your food safe from bacteria". This message is appropriate for industry but not consumers. An appropriate message for consumers would be, "Keeping you safe from bacteria in food".

2. The mass public is unaware that harmful organisms can be in their food.

Many of our callers state they've never HEARD of E. coli or Salmonella or that people can actually die from food poisoning. They understand that someone can get sick from food, and many say they've experienced "the-something-that-I-ate flu", but believed it to be that the food was old or slightly spoiled and not an issue of pathogenic contamination.

3. The general public is unaware of who constitute the most "at risk" populations.

Parents of children, pregnant women, people taking antacids, cancer patients—these are all examples of people that we have heard from who had no idea that they faced additional vulnerability to severe foodborne illness, including death. Every food safety message and all materials that we send out should state that while ALL

individuals are at some risk from foodborne illness, that the following populations are especially vulnerable, and then of course, enumerate them.

S.T.O.P. fully supports having food safety education as part of a school's curriculum. It is truly unfortunate that it is not a requirement especially during periods of budget crunches where so-called non-essential courses such as this and Phys.Ed. and music get dropped.

We also support reaching children as early as possible, as early as the preschool level. They're like little sponges at that age. Alex was just four and in preschool when he came home all excited about wanting to teach his dad and me about "S.T.O.P., DROP and ROLL", a lesson about what to do in case of a fire. We learned about the importance of re-cycling from Alex, again at the preschool level.

But again, I can't emphasize enough the need for the messages to be consistent and truthful. For instance, at S.T.O.P. we tell our audiences, whether it's a single person or a huge group, to treat all meat and poultry as if it's contaminated. This can be done in a non-alarming manner while still advancing the seriousness of the issue.

We at S.T.O.P. encourage all of you and your organizations to weigh in with your elected officials on the importance of food safety. We also encourage you to submit your comments on actions proposed by food safety agencies such as FSIS and FDA. As you've figured out by now, we believe that the onus for food safety rests squarely on industry and government. But while we continue our efforts in getting regulatory measures in place to reduce the prevalence of pathogens, society really depends on you to educate them about the risks in food and how they can best minimize them and protect themselves. Again, just please give them THE TRUTH.

But the best way that we at S.T.O.P. have learned to make people conscious of the gravity and necessity of safe food practices is to tell our stories and explain that the food poisoning tragedies that they hear or read about happened to real people. And that behind the dry statistics—the 5,000 deaths, the 325,000 hospitalizations, the 76 million illnesses—are real people, with real faces, with real stories. And then we focus on the importance that we want to prevent them from being a statistic and that one way they can minimize their risk, is by learning these food safety strategies. Take our stories with you and use them in your educational programs.

Good luck to all of you in your campaigns. Let us know if there's any way we can help.