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You can choose to help S.T.O.P. every time you shop by having your favorite stores and restaurants donate part of your bill! Find out how at www.safetables.org/shopforstop.html



DEDICATION

S.T.O.P. dedicates this newsletter to **Morgan Alayna Dockter**

August 31, 1998 – July 26, 2002

Morgan is a victim of *E. coli* O157:H7

Morgan's mother Shauna writes: "This is the poem we are having put on Morgan's headstone (written by me, her mom). Morgan could see beauty everywhere. She loved everything. She was nothing but love."

*See those Yellow Dandelions growing in your yard?
Look at them with eyes that you had never before.
No longer just a weed to pull and throw away.
For these are Morgan's favorite little flower
and she hopes that you can see....*

All the beauty that is found in such a Tiny Yellow Weed!

Morgan's father Casey Dockter writes: "To Morgan deep water was big water. The Book of Pooh and Scooby-doo was daily programming. Harry Potter and Shrek were nightly. Morgan's favorite songs were American Girl by Rick Springfield and Get the Party Started by Pink. American Girl because I think Morgan thought when he said girl it was referring to her because she was a girl.....In Morgan's last days she asked me if I would put her T.V. in her room when she got better. I said that I would. We were coloring a picture together and she asked me if we could finish it when the sun came up because she was tired. We never did get to finish coloring...."



Safe Tables Our Priority



NEWS

IN THIS ISSUE:

- Texas Mom Takes On "Trade Secrets"
- Why Now, Mad Cow? Guest Editorial by Former FSIS Chief
- White House Snoozes, Public Loses?
- 2003 Honoraria
- S.T.O.P. Giant & Germ Awards

"There is nothing we can do to turn back the clock. But if we can help protect others from facing the same horrors our family has, we will get something good out of something evil . . . We are dedicated to making that hope a reality."

– Dan Capriotti, S.T.O.P. father & advocate, 1999

S.T.O.P.
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PRIORITY

Spring 2004

www.SafeTables.org



A Nation Awakens To Mad Food Policy



reprinted by permission of cartoonist John Sherffius

S.T.O.P. set the tone early for the national media response to United States' first mad cow discovery. "There are as many holes in USDA's surveillance as there are in the brain of a cow afflicted with BSE," revealed S.T.O.P. advocate Laurie Girard and President Nancy Donley in a press release issued just hours after the December 23rd announcement. S.T.O.P. welcomed USDA's long-overdue ban on the use of sick cows in the foodstream, increased mad cow testing, and other common-sense measures, calling them "a meaningful step forward and a victory for food safety", but warns that critical gaps remain unaddressed. For S.T.O.P.'s public comments and history on mad cow disease, see www.safetables.org.

S.T.O.P. Confronts USDA on Misleading Use of Statistics

S.T.O.P. Board Member and professional biostatistician Barb Kowalcyk triggered an official investigation of U.S. Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) statistical practices last month following a request to the Secretary of Agriculture for a meeting to discuss questionable FSIS statistical practices. The ensuing meeting raised such compelling questions about FSIS' commitment to sound science and public health that USDA has taken the unusual step of convening an independent commission of statisticians and economists to review the agency's statistical practices.

Kowalcyk's initiative was spurred by three recent FSIS press releases announcing drops in *Salmonella*, *E. coli* O157:H7 and *Listeria monocytogenes* contamination in raw meat and poultry products, which raised a number of red flags upon careful reading. "I noticed that all three press releases give the impression that the nationwide prevalence of foodborne pathogens has gone down," Kowalcyk said, "yet the data did not support that conclusion." Kowalcyk also questioned FSIS' comparison of nine months of 2003 data to twelve months of 2002 data.

Continued on page 4



ACTION ALERT

If White House Snoozes, The Public Loses

Help S.T.O.P. make food safety a presidential campaign focus by writing the candidates today!

2002: 50 million pounds of meat is recalled for contamination, breaking national records.

2003: The largest food-related Hepatitis A outbreak in U.S. history sickens 600+ and kills 3.

2004: The first mad cow discovery in America displays haphazard USDA oversight to the world.

Verdict: With so much on the plate, America can't afford for our next leader to be asleep at the meal. Get involved.

Join the S.T.O.P. wake-up call!
www.safetables.org

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From the Executive Director

"The Awe-Inspiring View From S.T.O.P. Central"

A hundred pages would be needed to capture the depth of passion and inspiration that buoys what S.T.O.P. members do and that makes this organization such an effective force for food safety. S.T.O.P. has never had so many caring and committed friends around the country making a difference! The view from S.T.O.P. Central is truly awe-inspiring. Snapshots from a typical day:

- An email arrives from Elisa Fisher in northern California - she's launched a citywide effort to get San Francisco restaurants to back their commitment to safe food by posting their inspection results.
- Fresh back from a trip to DC to talk with their legislators about *E. coli*, Chris and Wendy Hackett work with S.T.O.P. to start a chapter to educate their Pennsylvania community. They name the chapter M.A.R.I.A.H. in honor of their daughter.
- Margaret Brill of New Jersey calls to say she's spoken before her local women's group and raised hundreds of dollars for S.T.O.P. Her long-time friends thank her for the opportunity to learn about her grandson Eric and the need for safer food.
- Laura Day of Georgia steps forward to represent consumers at a Centers for Disease Control conference on health impacts of contaminated animal feed, offering professionals a firsthand look at the importance of their jobs.

So many heroic stories - more are scattered through this newsletter. Indeed, there are so many examples, and not nearly enough space. But to everyone who's been on call in the past year for press conferences, public hearings, fundraising efforts, conference speeches, victim support, letter-writing campaigns, and more - far too many people to list here - **THANK YOU.** You are the driving force behind S.T.O.P. and behind safer food in this country.

And for anybody who's looking to contribute a few hours on an ongoing basis, now's an especially exciting time to start (or restart) to volunteer! We've kicked off several new initiatives in 2004, knitting together new Policy, Chapter Development, Outreach, and Institutional Development Committees, with Leadership Development and Victim Assistance Committees also in the works! To get involved, just give us a call at 802 863-0555, or write outreach@safetables.org.

- Karen Taylor Mitchell

S.T.O.P. Leader Passes The Torch

"Thank You Elaine!"

An emotion-filled "changing of the guard" happened recently when retiring founder **Elaine Dodge** bid goodbye to her role on S.T.O.P.'s Board of Directors. Elaine has held a leadership position with S.T.O.P. ever since its inception - as an advisor on loan from Government Accountability Project; as S.T.O.P.'s Executive Director; and for the past four years, as S.T.O.P.'s Board Chair. Her invaluable guidance and indomitable spirit will be missed at monthly Board meetings.

S.T.O.P. congratulates S.T.O.P.'s new Vice President and Board Chair **Michael Scarpone**, and welcomes to our Board **Barbara Kowalczyk**, President of S.T.O.P.'s Dane County Chapter.



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in memory of

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ACTIVIST PROFILE - HAZEL ELLIS, MONTGOMERY, TX



photo: Dalton Ellis, age 3.

How can I convey the hand-numbing terror that a mother feels when her happy, healthy two year old goes into total kidney failure with bloody diarrhea in just three days? What can I say that would sink into your heart, enable you to feel my deepest fears, shed precious tears and make you want to stand up on behalf of all our children?

I found S.T.O.P. when I was searching the internet for information on *E.coli*. My son Dalton was ill with *E.coli* that developed into HUS [*hemolytic uremic syndrome*] in the Spring of 2003. I came across S.T.O.P.'s website, and was moved by the many stories and faces I saw. I called the hotline 1-800-350-STOP that same day.

What motivates you to work for safer food?

There is an underlying level of trust that is placed in our food industry; and it has been shattered. Far too often the media and the organization/event where the outbreak occurred blame the parents by stating that meat needs to be cooked thoroughly or that the kids put their dirty hand in their mouths. It's hard for me to understand why there are not more regulations and guidelines that slaughterhouses, meat packing plants, restaurants, supermarkets and school cafeterias have to follow. How can known contaminated food items that we feed our small children be allowed to remain on the shelves?

I cannot think of a single, more deadly childhood illness that is as preventable. If only our government, food industry, and retailers would wake up and see how their politics, greed, and apathy are affecting our small children. When I think about everything that happened and everyone that has been and will be affected, I am amazed at how little government intervention there is.

What have you focused on?

I wanted to know what happened when a food product was re-called, from a local level. So I contacted the stores where I shop. I have also contacted state agencies and local agencies, even federal. The responses to my inquiries are varied. Some are almost patronizing and others just plain refuse to share information. In one letter I was told, "Dear Ms. Ellis: Thank you for your recent inquiry regarding company policies for product recalls, as well as store cleanliness. Unfortunately the information you have requested [including whether shopping carts are cleaned] is proprietary. I apologize for any inconvenience..." I never give up though. My son's health and preventing other children from suffering like he did motivate me.

Hazel's Hints for Maximum Impact

- △ Contact your local stores and agencies. You are their neighbor; they have a vested interest to make sure you return to their store or event.
- △ Meet with people in person and bring your own personal story to leave with them, and bring a picture.
- △ Correct the news media! Call, or write letters, and let them know how they can improve their reporting.
- △ Make your letters personal. Tell them your story and why food safety and sanitation are important to you.
- △ Keep track of whom you have talked to and what they have said. Use a spreadsheet or graph paper to list details!
- △ Keep paper copies of correspondence. Letters and e-mails are a great tool because you can refer back to them.
- △ Don't stop! If you are hit with frustrations or roadblocks, keep going. Be persistent. You might just prevent an illness or death of one of your neighbors.
- △ Use S.T.O.P. as a resource and to share with others what you've learned.

How is Dalton doing now?

Finally, Dalton is off the food restrictions and is back to being an active, happy child who will forever be a kidney & GI patient. The only visible signs of that terrible nightmare are the scars that are permanently etched on his precious skin. The scar on his neck from the dialysis, the one on his side from his lung needing to be drained, the one on his groin area from the PICC line and a small one on the inside of his wrist where they put in an arterial line that monitored a constant blood pressure. They serve me as my constant reminder of "what could have been and what is". I am thanking God everyday for healing my son and giving us another chance.



S.T.O.P. Parent Proves FSIS Statistical Misuses Abound

Continued from page 1

After closely reviewing the press releases and associated reports, Kowalcyk, who holds a Masters' degree in statistics, found serious statistical problems including conclusions based on inappropriate comparisons, design and implementation flaws in the test programs themselves, and misleading reporting to the press. (For more details, see sidebar.)

Kowalcyk, who lost her son Kevin to *E. coli* O157:H7 in 2001, will soon present her findings at two Congressional briefings. She hopes to continue the dialogue between S.T.O.P. and USDA to ensure that the design flaws are rectified in upcoming studies. But, she adds, "The extent and nature of these problems is just more evidence of the need for an overhaul of our whole food safety system and, in particular, the need for an independent single food safety agency." S.T.O.P. Board President Nancy Donley agrees, saying "Mediocrity like this cannot be allowed to continue destroying American lives."

For more insight into FSIS policy problems, see S.T.O.P.'s 10-year report online at www.safetables.org.

2003 GIANT AND GERM AWARDS



GIANTS

S.T.O.P. grandparent **Patricia Buck**, whose personal initiative to visit more than 70 Congressional offices regarding the meat safety bill nicknamed "Kevin's Law" in memory of her grandson has helped to garner 44 co-sponsors to date; **The Philadelphia Inquirer**, whose 2003 series on foodborne illness was one of the most complete and well-researched of the last decade; and **United Food and Commercial Workers**, whose visionary and longstanding support of food safety continues to make all the difference for consumers.



GERMS

The **American Meat Institute and USDA**, which campaigned ferociously for years against a common-sense ban on downer cow use, only to reverse their position when it became a huge trade and financial issue; the **Louisiana Oyster Task Force**, which has pressured California's governor to abandon a lifesaving state ban on untreated Gulf Coast oysters passed last year after 48 *Vibrio vulnificus* deaths; and **Undersecretary for Food Safety Elsa Murano**, for her insistence to Congress that her agency does not need the expanded enforcement powers that Secretary of Agriculture Ann Veneman suggested in 2003.

Among the serious statistical problems Kowalcyk unveiled for top USDA staffers:

1) Inappropriate Comparisons

To produce the reported drops, FSIS inappropriately compared data from two different testing programs. The first, the HACCP Verification Testing Program, was only designed as a regulatory program to provide a snapshot of an individual plant's performance over a period of time. It cannot provide estimates of nationwide prevalence of foodborne pathogens. In contrast, the Microbiological Baseline Surveys conducted in the 1990's were statistically designed to provide nationwide prevalences of selected foodborne pathogens. "Because they were designed to measure different things," Kowalcyk says, "comparing data is like comparing apples and oranges. You can't come up with a meaningful conclusion about pathogen loads." In addition, nine months' worth of 2003 data was compared to 12 months of 2002 data, which is statistically inappropriate because different plants were tested each year.

2) Serious Design and Implementation Flaws

Neither testing program achieves what it should because of serious design and implementation flaws. For example, in the baseline surveys, Kowalcyk observes that ground meat products were not sampled during summer months, when contamination rates are often higher. Furthermore, she calls sample sizes "outrageously inadequate," citing a ground chicken survey where only 285 one pound samples were collected from plants whose combined production totalled 9.5 million pounds per week. Results from these studies were used to establish the performance standards used in today's regulatory programs. (Repeat studies are planned for 2004.)

The verification testing program, intended to monitor plant performance, is also flawed because it was not statistically designed, different plants are sampled from year to year, samples are not random, and samples are not evenly distributed across product groups. For example, in 2002, FSIS collected 58,085 samples for *Salmonella*, but 40,000 were taken from beef products rather than poultry products. Kowalcyk warns, "Since beef products tend to have lower levels of *Salmonella* than poultry, sampling in this manner stacks the deck in favor of finding a lower incidence of *Salmonella*."

3) Misleading Reporting of Data

Good scientific practices require that statistics be reported thoroughly, so that any potential reader does not take the results out of context and interpret them inappropriately. While the three FSIS press releases don't specifically state that they are talking about nationwide prevalences of foodborne pathogens, neither do they clarify that they aren't. "The average reader is definitely left with the impression that the nationwide prevalence of foodborne pathogens has gone down," Kowalcyk notes. "It is irresponsible to assume that readers will have the background to fill in the gaps."

In summary, Kowalcyk says, "FSIS claims to be based on sound science, yet it is not using good scientific practices."



GUEST EDITORIAL: "FOOD SAFETY POLITICS"

by Michael R. Taylor

In response to the discovery of a single cow with mad cow disease, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has been given a political blank check to impose new regulatory controls on the beef industry. These measures are justified not by any significant risk to public health – there is not a single known case of anyone contracting the human equivalent of mad cow disease from eating American beef – but rather to ward off a crisis in public confidence and to protect markets for U.S. beef exports.

This is all well and good. Public confidence in the food supply and the economic welfare of the beef industry are important public interests that can justify regulation. But, at the same time, some real food safety hazards are not being addressed. As many as a quarter of the beef cattle offered for slaughter in the United States during summer months are colonized with the deadly bacteria *E. coli* O157:H7, which we know kills scores of people every year when it shows up in ground beef and spreads via cow manure to fresh produce. Likewise, much of the *Salmonella* and other bacteria that contribute to an estimated annual toll of 5,000 deaths and 325,000 hospitalizations from foodborne illness originate on the farm.

Rest assured, however, that USDA does not have a political blank check to tackle these problems at the farm level. **USDA can regulate on the farm all it wants to protect the health of animals, but Congress has given it no authority to do so to protect the health of people.** In fact, due to longstanding opposition from livestock producers, it is virtually taboo in food safety regulatory circles to suggest that USDA consider on-farm regulatory interventions to address the real public health problem of foodborne illness.

There are, to be sure, practical limitations on what government could do, even if politically empowered, to regulate or otherwise change the practices of America's 800,000 beef cattle producers; but the lack of any USDA mandate or resources to consider on-farm food safety interventions leaves the burden of reducing harmful contamination on slaughter plants, ground beef processors, and consumers. Many of the leading meat processors have invested heavily in sanitizing systems and other measures to reduce bacterial contamination, and they have had some real success; but they are working to correct a problem that could, with further research and focused effort, be prevented to at least some extent by interventions at the farm level.

This situation reflects a much broader problem in our country's system of food safety protection. **Both USDA and the Food and Drug Administration operate under antiquated statutes that provide no mandate for looking at the food system as an integrated whole and using the best science to determine how best to deploy their efforts to reduce foodborne illness.** Indeed, the meat and poultry inspection laws administered by USDA block such an approach by mandating a century-old approach to slaughter inspection that consumes most of USDA's food safety resources but has been found in numerous reports by the National Academy of Sciences and the General Accounting Office to be deficient in protecting food safety.

Congress and the administration should act to correct these fundamental problems in the nation's food safety system. The solution is not more command-and-control regulation but rather a much more science-based approach to identifying risks and opportunities to reduce risk wherever they arise across the food system. This will require major statutory reforms, which will happen only if all participants in the food safety system, industry and consumers alike, come together to write the political check for change.

In the 2002 Farm Bill, Congress authorized a Presidential Food Safety Commission to design the statutory and organizational change necessary to implement a more science- and risk-based food safety system. Neither Congress nor the administration saw fit, however, to fund the commission, and it was never established. Maybe the time has come to dust off that idea, expand the charge to include the new threats posed by BSE and bioterrorism, and get started on modernizing the food safety system so that we can make changes to prevent a crisis rather than only in response to one.

* Emphases added. Mr. Taylor is a senior fellow at *Resources For The Future* and former administrator of USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service. This piece first appeared in *Knight-Ridder* newspapers.

S.T.O.P. Relies On You!

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