

## **Are Americans Really Dying of Eating?**

The following two articles address the above issue.

### **Flawed Statistics Distort Food Safety Debate**

Supporters of legislation to give the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) enhanced powers have been tossing around various statistics to support their case. For example, in a July 12, 2010 press release, Consumers Union noted that "According to the Centers for Disease Control, each year, 76 million Americans are sickened, 325,000 hospitalized, and 5,000 die from consuming contaminated food."

Writing in the July 24 New York Times, Eric Schlosser, well-known food industry basher, put the same CDC data more colorfully. "Every day," he wrote, "about 200,000 Americans are sickened by contaminated food. Every year, about 325,000 are hospitalized by a food-borne illness. And the number who are killed annually by something they ate is roughly the same number of Americans who've been killed in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2003."

Not surprisingly, Consumers Union reported that in a recent national poll "80 percent of Americans Want Congress to Pass Food Safety Legislation Immediately." That legislation would grant the FDA wide new powers.

#### **Are Americans Really Dying From Eating?**

The first point to note about the CDC estimates is that they were published over a decade ago in 1999. Most of the data used is for 1997 or earlier. In 1997, the U.S. population was 267.7 million. It has since grown by over 40 million. So, if the CDC estimates are still valid, that means the per capita incidence of sickness, hospitalizations or deaths from contaminated food has fallen by 13 percent. That is, of course, nonsense. The truth is that the CDC has not updated its estimates for 13 years.

A second issue is how reliable the CDC estimates were for 1997. A close reading of the study by Dr Paul S. Mead and seven other CDC staffers suggests that their estimates are extremely soft. The authors noted the shortage of much key data, the problems caused by under-reporting of food borne illnesses, the difficulty of identifying an illness as due to contaminated food rather than other potential sources such as contaminated water, and the many unidentified food pathogens that may cause illness.

#### **Use of Heroic Assumptions Makes CDC Estimates Extremely Dubious**

To correct for those effects, they made some heroic assumptions. For example, they assumed that illnesses from Salmonella were 38 times the reported cases, those from E.coli.O157:H7 were 20 times the reported cases, but those from Clostridium botulinum and Listeria monocytogenes were only twice the reported cases.

They made estimates of what percentages of illnesses from each pathogen were food-borne. Regarding these percentage estimates, they commented that, "The rationale for each estimate is presented in the Appendix; although precise percentages are generally difficult to justify, in most instances there is ample support for the approximate values used." Translation: "We are guessing, but trust us."

To arrive at estimates of hospitalizations and deaths due to food-borne causes, they doubled the reported numbers. However, they admitted that "unknown agents" accounted for 81% of food-borne illnesses and hospitalizations and 64% of deaths."

The authors also failed to establish what proportion of food contamination arose in the formal food production and processing system and what proportion was due to errors by consumers in food transportation, storage, preparation, cooking or reheating.

With assumptions piled upon assumptions, the study's final estimates must be subject to a high degree of error. Yet, the authors made no attempt to report the potential size of those errors. So, the confidence Consumers Union, the New York Times, and others place in these old CDC study estimates is seriously misplaced.

#### **Why Has the CDC Study Not Been Updated?**

One of the authors' concluding comments is that "Further refinements of food-borne disease estimates require continued and improved active surveillance." Since 1997, there have been substantial advances in research and surveillance, but the CDC still allows this outdated and questionable study to be represented as the definitive word on food-borne illnesses, hospitalizations and deaths.

Is it that the results are big enough, and scary enough, that they serve the political purpose of justifying more tax money for the food safety bureaucracies? Is the CDC afraid that an updated study with more recent data and more advanced science would undermine the current estimates?

#### **Reasoned Food Safety Debate Deserves Better Base Data**

Clearly, it is not possible to base sound decisions about future food policies on a study that is outdated and full of questionable conjectures and conclusions. The policies now being debated will cost taxpayers billions of dollars and impose billions of dollars in additional costs on food suppliers, and especially the perishable foods sector, in the U.S. and abroad.

The CDC needs to get on the ball and prepare an updated study that gives a truer picture of the risks involved in the commercial food system and that gives a better guide to the remedial measures that might give the greatest payoff in improved food safety.

#### **Footnote on Consumers Union Survey**

The July 2010 World Apple Report featured an article entitled, "Which Consumer Concerns are Real?" It questioned the credibility of many consumer surveys. For example, in the Consumers Union telephone survey cited above, here is how they framed the question on food safety, capitalizing selected words: "Congress is considering food safety legislation that GIVES THE FDA THE POWER TO RECALL FOOD WHEN IT POSES A DANGER TO HEALTH AND SAFETY. How would you describe your support for Congress passing this legislation IMMEDIATELY?"

The responses were: Strongly support (37%), Support (43%), Oppose (9%), Strongly oppose (7%), Don't know (4%) and Refused (1%). It is from these responses that Consumers Union concluded that 80% of Americans want Congress to pass food safety legislation immediately.

However, note that respondents were not given any information about the potential cost of the new legislation, nor about the alternative choices for use of that money, such as extending unemployment benefits or helping small banks increase their lending. Given only one choice, how many respondents would support food that endangers health and safety?

While Consumers Union deserves criticism for fielding such a loaded question, the pollster they employed, Opinion Research Corporation, is equally culpable. By lending their professional expertise to such a slanted question, they are helping to further damage the good name of the polling industry.

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