

Whole of Food Chain approach – what does this mean for nutrition and why is it important?

HR Yeatman

Graduate School of Public Health

The role of nutrients in the reduction of chronic disease risks is often a primary focus of nutrition scientists. However, this may be at the expense of attending to more fundamental weak links in the food chain that result in disease and death on a daily basis. This paper will examine the impact of a failure of nutrition scientists to be involved in wide-ranging discussions of the food chain and the changes that are necessary to ensure the delivery of a safe and nutritious food supply to the community.

Strengthening the links in the food chain is the aim of the recent changes to food regulation around the world. The changes are a response to significant public outcry at the problems in the food chain that have resulted in significant public health problems. In the 1990s, the occurrence of Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy, BSE (mad cow's disease), has resulted in more than 90 deaths from variant CJD and a net cost to the UK government of 3.7 billion pounds sterling. Also in the UK, foot and mouth disease outbreaks in 2001 devastated the livestock industry, caused massive social disruption as human and food transport was curtailed and resulted in control costs of 2.3 billion and economic costs of 14 billion pounds sterling. Staphylococcal contaminated milk by one company (Snow Brand) in Japan resulted in 15,000 illnesses and a cost of US\$430 million. In Australia, food-borne illness is estimated to cost over A\$2 billion per year. Issues related to contamination of food with heavy metals, bacteria or prions have become the prime focus of national governments. They have reacted to these problems by establishing food safety agencies with greater public accountability and a whole of food chain approach to food production and regulation. However, has this been at the expense of nutrition and longer-term public health outcomes?

This paper will examine 'what are the links' in the food chain that have caused major blows to the public's confidence in the food system and government responses to these problems. The question, 'Have nutrition outcomes been left out of this *whole of food chain approach* by governments?' will be examined. Links will be made between the 'non nutrition' problems in the food system, such as on-farm practices, genetically modified food crops and food safety programs in industry, and the public's confidence that the food system can deliver positive nutrition outcomes. Finally, the impact of loss of consumer confidence in the food system will be explored, particularly with regard to public opinion of science and what it can deliver in the way of improvements in nutrition outcomes.

Key words: food chain, public confidence, food regulation