

Victorian Food Safety News

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A Month of Melamine Milk Mayhem

We're sure most of you have heard about the recent food safety scandal regarding melamine contamination in Chinese dairy products. But did you know that melamine could be present in trace quantities in food through leaching from the packaging? And did you know that food products containing trace levels of melamine are not considered to be a risk to human health or unsuitable to consume?

The Food Safety and Regulatory Activities (FSRA) unit in the Department of Human Services knows the answers. Over the last month we have been managing this complex issue with our interstate colleagues to ensure there is no risk to Australian consumers.

In September 2008, reports emerged from China that a range of Chinese infant formulas had been found to contain high levels of melamine (an industrial chemical). The consumption of infant formula contaminated with melamine has been linked to four deaths, and the hospitalisation of a number of other infants with kidney problems. It is now thought that the milk used to produce the infant formula had been watered down, and that melamine was later added to give the milk a false high protein result, thereby hiding its dilution.

Over the month that followed, the FSRA unit, along with their interstate colleagues, sampled and tested a number of food products for melamine contamination. So far, more than 120 products have been analysed. To date only five products have

returned a positive result for melamine above a level of 2.5mg/kg—which is a nationally agreed referral point for food authorities to conduct a risk assessment.

All five products have been voluntarily withdrawn from sale. Two other products have also been voluntarily withdrawn as a precautionary measure.

No Chinese infant formulas have been imported into Australia so there is no health risk to Australian infants from this source.

At the time of going to press, food authorities across Australia, including the FSRA, continue to test food products.

Find out more...

For further information on melamine contamination, please see the Food Standards Australia and New Zealand (FSANZ) website at: www.foodstandards.gov.au



These snacks (although deemed safe) have been voluntarily withdrawn from the Australian market, after they were found to contain traces of melamine. Four other products have also been withdrawn from sale by importers.

Pilot program to educate hospitality staff about food allergies

Food allergies are a growing problem in Australia and worldwide, with one percent of adults and around five percent of children affected by food allergies and intolerance*. In some cases, these allergies can be life threatening.

In response to this issue, the Minister for Health announced funding for a pilot program in November 2007. The program will involve local councils in educating hospitality and food service staff about allergies and food handling.

A working group, chaired by the Chief Health Officer, is now formulating the pilot program. The Food Allergy Working Party comprises representatives from:

- The Ilhan Food Allergy Foundation
- Anaphylaxis Australia
- The Australian Society of Clinical Immunology and Allergy
- Restaurant and Catering Victoria
- Clubs Victoria
- Australian Hotels Association
- Coeliac Society Victoria.

A part-time project officer is assisting the working group, thanks to the kind co-operation of the City of Maribyrnong.

The pilot program will be tested in two council areas—one metropolitan, (Melbourne City Council) and one regional, (Ballarat City Council)—with plans to adopt the resulting model across the remaining municipalities in Victoria.

* State of Victoria, 2007, 'Food allergy and intolerance' (fact sheet), *Better Health Channel*, State of Victoria, Melbourne, accessed 30 September 2008 at: www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Good Showing at the Good Food and Wine Show

Once again, the Food Safety stand at the annual Good Food and Wine Show proved to be a great way to raise public and industry awareness of food safety.

The show is Australia's largest consumer food, drink, kitchen appliances and cookware exhibition, and was held at Melbourne's Exhibition and Convention Centre on Friday 30 May to Sunday 1 June 2008.

The Department of Human Services' Food Safety and Regulatory Activities (FSRA) Unit has participated each year since 2004. An estimated 30,000 visitors or more attended this year's show—making it a perfect opportunity to promote key food safety messages to food businesses and consumers alike.



Terry Oughtred from the department's Food Safety Unit answers food safety queries

questions about food safety issues, such as:

- food safety at home
- food hygiene
- the food complaints process
- food-related illness.

To help spread the food safety message, we distributed 6,500 'show bags' containing promotional goodies, including:

- a fridge thermometer
- a food safety magnet
- the information booklet *Your guide to food safety*
- a food safety poster for display in kitchens.

New activity!

A popular new addition to this year's show was the fridge stacking competition, in which visitors to the stand were asked to fill a fridge with a variety of everyday food items. People who filled the fridge correctly (according to food safety principles) were rewarded with a cooler bag. Hints and encouragement for less confident competitors provided an entertaining learning experience (and eventually, a prize)!



The fridge stacking competition was a hit with visitors

Stand a success with show visitors

Our eye-catching Food Safety stand offered food safety give-aways, fun activities to build knowledge, and advice to both consumers and businesses.

Environmental Health Officers (EHOs) from metropolitan and regional areas who staffed the stand during the show reported that visitors asked a range of

VCEC recommendations update

In late 2007 the Victorian Competition and Efficiency Commission (VCEC) conducted a review into food regulation. The VCEC made a number of recommendations for food safety reforms. Some of the reforms are already underway. Here's an update on progress so far...

Statewide food safety monitoring and reporting framework

There is currently no statewide information available on the outcomes of food safety regulatory activities undertaken in Victoria. However, local and state government both recognise that there should be statewide monitoring and reporting of these activities.

Project objective

The objective of this project is to establish mechanisms that will enable uniform collection, analysis and publication of appropriate and useful data under the *Food Act 1984*.

As part of the proposed monitoring and reporting framework, food safety performance information from 79 local government authorities will be collected into a database. Performance reporting will:

- help us to better target our regulatory efforts
- enable overall performance trend monitoring
- enable statewide reporting of food activity outcomes.

Progress

The consultant hired to identify Australian and international best practice in performance reporting and monitoring for food safety regulation has now completed their report. They have also developed a suite of core performance indicators for local government to report against.

The *Reporting and Monitoring of Food Safety Regulatory Activities in Victoria* (August 2008) is currently being reviewed by a working group of the joint Department of Human Services/ Municipal Association of Victoria (DHS/MAV) Food Safety Coordination Project. The review objectives are to make sure that the information that is collected by the new framework can be used to:

- assist with policy design
- enable reporting to the community, minister and industry via an annual report
- analyse food safety trends
- analyse food industry types
- enable councils to benchmark themselves.

Our next steps are to:

- develop a rationale and scope for the framework to assist with policy design
- develop a draft policy framework
- identify the tools required for data collection, and to ensure data quality
- prepare an implementation framework and strategy report, including the appropriate vehicles for reporting, costs, information technology constraints and opportunities.

Find out more...

For further information on the statewide monitoring and reporting framework please contact the Senior Project Officer, Food Safety and Regulatory Activities Unit on 9096 0366.

New food business based classification system proposed

One of the VCEC recommendations was to review the current food classification system, with the aim of simplifying the current regulatory system and reducing unnecessary red tape and compliance burdens.

With this in mind, the DHS/MAV Food Safety Coordination Project appointed a consultant to review the existing classification system and propose a more structured risk classification system that:

- better targets regulatory controls and administrative effort to risk
- creates opportunities for some reduction in the administrative burden of regulation, while ensuring risk is managed appropriately.

The draft recommendations propose changing the existing two class system so that it will better cater for lower risk food premises, by adding two further classifications: Classes 3 and 4.

The proposed classification system

It is proposed to develop four classes of food premises:

- Class 1—Food premises selling ready-to-eat high risk food to a vulnerable population
- Class 2—Food premises selling high risk/medium risk foods
- Class 3—Food premises selling low risk foods (or pre-packaged unstable foods)
- Class 4—Food premises selling pre-packaged low risk foods.

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Requirements under the new business classification system

Proposed Class 1 food premises	
Must develop their own food safety program (FSP), which will be independently audited	
It is proposed premises will be audited twice a year	
Example of premises type	Current classification
Nursing home	Class 1
Hospital	Class 1
Childcare centre	Class 1
Proposed Class 2 food premises	
Will have a choice as to whether they:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - develop their own FSP, to be third party audited <li style="text-align: center;">OR - use a department registered FSP template, to be council assessed 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Premises with food business specific FSP to be audited once a year - Food premises with a department-accredited FSP to be assessed once a year 	
Example of premises type	Current classification
Baby food manufacturer	Class 2
Salad/vegetable/fruit manufacturer	Class 2
Restaurant	Class 2
Fish and chip takeaway	Class 2
Proposed Class 3 food premises	
Will not require a FSP, but will be:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - required to follow food safety guidance notes (to be developed by the department) - encouraged to undertake food handling training 	
Mandatory inspection once a year	
Example of premises type	Current classification
Milk bar	Class 2
Brewery manufacturer	Class 2
Cut up fruit/vegetables	Class 2
Proposed Class 4 food premises	
No documentation required but will be encouraged to undertake food handling training	
No mandatory inspections required	
Example of premises type	Current classification
Whole fruit—fruit shop	Class 2
Newsagencies—all packaged low risk foods (such as packaged lollies and chips)	No change

Please note, not all types of premises are listed in the table above; these are examples only. For premises that do not fall into one of the business types listed above, a series of questions with 'yes and no' answers have been developed that will determine the particular risk classification to be applied.

Implementation timelines

A risk classification tool and guidance notes are currently being developed through the DHS/MAV working group by a contractor and department staff. The tool and guidance notes should be completed by the end of November 2008, after which they will be pilot-tested by a number of councils and fine-tuned. The new system is due to be implemented during 2010.

Find out more...

For further information on the proposed risk classification system, please contact the Senior Project Officer, Food Safety and Regulatory Activities Unit on 9096 0366.

Single registration for temporary and mobile food premises

Temporary and mobile food premises such as food vans, food stalls at markets, and community organisations fundraising with sausage sizzles often operate in several municipalities. Currently the Food Act requires temporary and mobile operators to register with each council where they sell food.

Another of the VCEC's recommendations was to improve and simplify the current regulatory system that applies to these temporary and mobile food premises. So, in order to streamline the registration process and cut out duplication, the DHS/MAV working group has proposed a central database of temporary and mobile food businesses. This database will enable each operator to register once without being legally obliged to obtain registration from each council in whose municipality they operate.

Timeline

The DHS/MAV working group has developed a set of proposed guidelines on how the central database might operate: *Discussion Paper: Single Registration &*

Notification Central Database of Temporary & Mobile Food Premises (July 2008).

We anticipate that guidelines for the operation of the single registration system will be ready for pilot-testing by mid 2009.

A training seminar for local government officers on how the system will work will be scheduled during 2010, with staged implementation of the new system planned for 2010/11.

The discussion paper can be accessed via the MAV website: <http://www.mav.asn.au> (under > Policy & Projects > Human Services > Public Health > Food Safety, then scroll down to first document OR simply type 'Templink' into the MAV website Search box.

Third party food safety auditor system in Victoria

The management of the third party food safety auditor system, and associated approval requirements, is being reviewed to reflect recommendations from:

- The *National Food Safety Auditor Policy* (endorsed by the Australian and New Zealand Food Regulation Ministerial Council in October 2006).
- The VCEC's final report recommendations (*Simplifying the Menu: Food Regulation in Victoria*, released September 2007).

The National Food Safety Auditor Policy

The main objective of this policy is to develop a consistent national approach to the management of food safety auditing in Australia and New Zealand before October 2011. To achieve this objective, all food safety regulators in Australia and New Zealand have been working together to complete an implementation plan for the policy. The details of this plan are expected to become public by the end of

2008; however, auditors can expect stronger oversight by the regulator with respect to their regulatory audits.

VCEC recommendations

The VCEC made two recommendations with respect to auditing:

Duplication of monitoring by local government and auditors

Firstly, the VCEC believed that businesses that had elected to be third party audited should not also receive a mandatory inspection by the registering council. Currently, the mandatory council inspection of third party audited businesses satisfies the risk management requirements of councils by providing an independent oversight of the activities of the auditor. Without this mandatory inspection the Department of Human Services must now consider an alternative strategy for monitoring the audits of approved auditors.

Recognition of proprietary food safety audit systems

The second VCEC recommendation covered the recognition of proprietary food safety audit systems—that is, quality assurance (QA) systems.

At present, the department requires a business to be audited by a department-approved auditor and for that auditor to issue a certificate under the Food Act.

The department will investigate how proprietary systems that meet the food safety requirements of the Food Act can be recognised. This will mean that a business that may have obtained, for example, SQF2000 certification, can simply provide that proprietary audit certificate for the purposes of Food Act registration.

Find out more...

For further information please contact the Senior Project Officer, Food Safety and Regulatory Activities Unit on 9096 0366.

Consumer food safety awareness and knowledge tracking study

As part of our brief to ensure food safety for businesses and the community, we need to know more about consumer awareness and knowledge of safe food handling practices.

With this in mind, the Food Safety Unit commissioned a series of quantitative market research surveys to ascertain and track awareness of food safety messages and knowledge of safe food handling practices. Our objectives in doing this research were to:

- identify gaps in consumer knowledge
- better understand attitudes and behaviour
- better target food safety messages to particular groups
- identify important trends.

The surveys were carried out over a period of 30 months (from May 2006–May 2008) and findings have been documented in a series of three tracking reports titled *Food Safety Awareness: A research report*.

Some interesting themes that have emerged from the research include:

- Notable increases in the enjoyment of food preparation by Victorians.
- A lack of food safety practice and awareness amongst people from Asian and European non-English speaking backgrounds.
- A steady increase in the role of children as 'other preparers of food' in the household.
- A small but statistically significant decrease during 2007–08 in the number of people who mainly shop for food at supermarkets.
- Overall, an increasing awareness of safe food handling, preparation and storage practices.

Further information and copies of the tracking reports, commissioned by the Department of Human Services from Newton, Wayman, Chong & Associates are available at: http://www.health.vic.gov.au/foodsafety/research/food_safety_knowledge.htm

Asian-style roast meats update

In 2004, the FSRA Unit undertook a food safety study of Asian-style roast meats that are hung and displayed at room temperatures. The study found that, provided good hygienic practices are followed in preparation of the roast meats, proprietors could display the varying meats at ambient temperatures for extended periods of time (up to 22 hours for Chinese-style roast ducks and chickens, and up to 7 hours for Chinese-style roast barbecue pork).

To better understand the impact of traditional cooking practices on the microbiological safety of these types of roast meats, we then undertook a follow-up study of Chinese roast ducks. With the cooperation of a local restaurant, we took samples of the ducks throughout the cooking and retail storage processes. The microbiological analyses are now complete, and the data is currently being analysed. By understanding the impact of specific steps in the production of these roast ducks, we can better manage the safety of this delicious product.



Portioned soft cheeses: Are they safe?

In 2004, the University of Melbourne's Microbiological Diagnostic Unit Public Health Laboratory (MDU PHL) was commissioned to conduct a study on the microbiological safety of portioned soft cheeses held at refrigerated and higher temperatures. The results of this study have been published in *The Australian Journal of Dairy Technology*, (August, 2008).

Why the study was conducted

The study was in response to an industry request to store soft cheeses at higher temperatures, in order to improve the quality of the cheese. Industry believed that as cheese is a fermented product, storage outside of refrigeration temperatures would be safe, as the 'good' fermentation bacteria in the cheese would suppress the growth of pathogens (disease causing organisms).

What was assessed...

MDU PHL's study assessed the growth of three potential pathogens in soft cheeses:

- *Escherichia coli* (*E. coli*)
- *Staphylococcus aureus* (*S. aureus* or 'golden staph')
- *Listeria monocytogenes* (*L. monocytogenes*).

The study examined soft cheeses (including blue, Brie and washed rind cheeses) that were cut into portions, wrapped in plastic and stored at various temperatures:

- at < 5°C (as recommended)
- at 16°C (to promote further ripening of the cheese)
- at 22°C (unrefrigerated).

The results

The results showed that portioned soft cheeses should be considered potentially hazardous foods.

L. monocytogenes was capable of growing on the cheeses at all three of the temperatures tested (including refrigeration temperatures).



S. aureus and *E. coli* were able to grow on cheese portions stored at the two higher temperatures, although the bacteria did not grow equally as well on all three types of cheese.

Recommendations

- For the safety of the consumer, portioned soft cheeses must be stored under refrigerated conditions.
- Good hygiene is important in the retail environment—if contamination with *L. monocytogenes* occurs during the slicing or wrapping processes, the bacteria is able to grow while the cheese is stored in the refrigerator.

What other foods may be risky?

Soft cheeses are amongst a range of foods that can present a foodborne risk to specific members of the community (for example, pregnant women). Foods to avoid include:

- soft cheeses
- ready-cooked cold meats
- ready-made salads
- pates
- raw and smoked seafoods.

Find out about safe food preparation and other foods to avoid during pregnancy from the Food Standards Australia and New Zealand (FSANZ) publication *Listeria and Pregnancy*, available at: http://www.foodstandards.gov.au/_srcfiles/Listeria_Brochure.pdf#search=%22listeria%22

Ice and foodborne illness

Commercially-produced ice has been implicated in disease outbreaks and the hygienic quality of ice should be part of the food safety program for any food premises. Standard 1.6.1 of the Australian Food Standards Code describes the microbiological limits for packaged water and ice: *E. coli* should not be detectable in either product.

Ice survey

A recent survey of ice undertaken by the Environmental Health Officer, North and West Regional group provided samples from six municipalities to the analysts (DTS Food Laboratories). Ice was collected from ice machines, ice buckets and containers used for holding or storing edible ice temporarily. In some cases, the ice was produced onsite at the premises from which the samples were taken, in other cases, the ice was pre-packaged and delivered to the food premises.

The results

Of the 153 samples of ice produced on the premises, only three were found to be unsuitable according to Standard 1.6.1.

All 16 of the ice samples supplied by commercial manufacturers were satisfactory.

Other microbiological analyses of total bacterial numbers showed that, while meeting the Code requirements, approximately 20 percent of ice samples contained high bacterial numbers, suggesting that ice handling and storage practices may have contaminated the product. This is consistent with the findings of similar surveys conducted in Queensland, Western Australia and Hong Kong.

Keeping ice safe

Businesses, EHOs and food safety auditors must remember that ice is considered a ‘food’, and should ensure that any ice machines on the food premises are included in the food safety program.

Key points

- Ice should be made from potable (drinking quality) water.
- Ice should be hygienically stored, handled and displayed. If ice machines are located in wards or at other sites in nursing homes or aged care facilities they should not be accessible to patients.
- Ice should be dispensed using clean utensils.

- The personal hygiene of staff is as important here as it is with any other food—do staff thoroughly wash and dry their hands prior to handling ice? If handling ice, staff should avoid handling other materials that may result in cross-contamination.

Remember, ice is a food!

The hygienic quality of ice should be part of the food safety program for any food premises.

Key staff behaviours

- Avoid breaking up loose bags of ice on the floor or any other unclean surface.
- Hold scoops by the handle; do not touch parts of the scoop that come into contact with ice.
- Do not return unused ice to the ice machine or package.
- Rinse serving containers with very hot water or sanitiser before and after use.
- Use serving containers fitted with a lid to prevent contamination.
- Use specific serving containers only for the purpose of storing ice.
- Clean and sanitise ice buckets and ice scoops daily.

Find out more...

If you would like further information about this survey, please contact Mr John Whittam, Regional Health Officer, North and Western Metropolitan Region on 03 9412 5408.



Your contributions

Victorian Food Safety News is a journal focusing on news in the food and food safety industry. We welcome your input. If you have any comments or stories of interest, please contact: Helen Brain on 1300 364352 or email: Helen.J.Brain@dhs.vic.gov.au.

Please note that articles and information provided may be edited.

Managing private water supplies

Many Victorians in rural communities are not connected to a reticulated water supply and rely on rainwater tanks for their water supply. Due to the drought affecting much of Victoria the demand for supply of potable water to replenish these rainwater tanks has increased. As a result, EHOs working in rural areas are now facing even greater challenges in trying to ensure that non-potable water is being treated correctly.

Recent outbreaks

Private water supplies in Victoria have recently been associated with outbreaks at several facilities, including aged care facilities, school camps and residential camps. In all of these cases the sources of the water were untreated and included either bore water, rainwater tanks or creek water being used for drinking purposes. Further investigations found that:

- bore water tested positive for *Campylobacter* and *E. coli*.
- rainwater tanks tested positive for *Salmonella Typhimurium 9*
- creek water tested positive for *E. coli*.

A residential camp and school camp involved in the outbreaks were issued a closure order until practices were rectified.

Ensuring better management of private water supplies

The Food Safety Unit is currently reviewing the guidelines to help operators better understand the risks associated with using private water supplies, and improve their management practices. The revised guidelines will cover the following water sources:

- water transporters
- businesses using surface water for drinking
- businesses using rainwater for drinking
- businesses using groundwater for drinking.

Find out more...

If you would like further information about managing private water supplies, or copies of any of the new guidelines, please contact: leanne.johnson@bawbawshire.vic.gov.au

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www.health.vic.gov.au/foodsafety/news.htm

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