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Insufficient overview of food safety risks in the Netherlands ***Structured approach needed to prevent unnecessary damage to public health***

The food safety system in the Netherlands has been shown to be vulnerable. There is no structured approach to detecting and assessing emerging food safety risks. In consequence, risks are not always identified properly or are discovered too late, and people can become ill unnecessarily as a result. This is shown in the report *'Emerging food safety risks'*, which was published 20 June 2019 by the Dutch Safety Board.

In recent years, the Netherlands has been alarmed on several occasions by incidents in the food chain, such as salmonella in smoked salmon, illegal activities with horsemeat, and Q fever. The discovery of the pesticide fipronil in eggs in summer 2017 prompted the Board to investigate the food safety system in the Netherlands. The investigation showed that the food sector mainly focuses on known risks that have arisen in the past. However, changing circumstances can cause food safety risks to occur in a different guise or become more severe. For example, the same toxin that occurs in the Japanese pufferfish was recently found in Dutch shellfish. An improved understanding of emerging risks should result in a more robust food safety system, in which companies and public authorities are less frequently taken by surprise and consumers suffer less damage to health.

Practical lessons

The Dutch Safety Board has investigated a number of examples of the way in which emerging risks are dealt with. In the fipronil incident, it was shown that the use of illegal substances against red mites in laying hens was not recognized as a risk, despite the fact that this had occurred previously. This meant that action was taken too late and millions of eggs had to be withdrawn from the market. Signals indicating that the risks of pathogens on fruit and vegetables might be greater than previously thought are not being properly picked up and assessed. In the US, fruit and vegetables are considered to be the main cause of food-borne infections, while in the Netherlands, in contrast, the risk is estimated to be very low. It is striking that this disparity has not been investigated and that it is not known which standpoint is closer to reality. However, it is important to have a good understanding of the risks, particularly as fruit and vegetables are so crucial for a healthy diet. In the period 2007-2010, the emergence of Q fever was recognized too late, which had serious consequences for the people who were infected. In the case of hepatitis E, the increase in infections from pork was detected, but uncertainties as to the risks impeded prompt action.

Identifying risks is complex

Food production and trade have become significantly more complex over the last few decades, making it harder to manage risks. Food products and raw materials come from all over the world and the trade flows are too complex for the associated risks to be clearly understood and evaluated. In addition, the number of vulnerable consumers, such as the elderly and the chronically ill, is increasing. The trend for consuming more raw and unprocessed food is accompanied by risks, as it is more likely

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that pathogens are not destroyed. All these factors require additional effort in order to continue guaranteeing food safety.

In the overwhelming majority of food-borne infections, the source of the infection is not traced, which is a major shortcoming of the system. It is virtually unknown what has made people ill and in consequence, the infection cannot be tackled at the source. This means, furthermore, that there is a lack of important information for assessing the performance of the food safety system.

Recommendations

The Dutch Safety Board maintains that a more robust food safety system is essential so as to estimate emerging risks properly in advance and intervene in good time. When incidents occur, it is important for signals to be recognized and acted on more effectively and more rapidly. In the current structure, the detection and assessment of emerging risks is fragmented. To make structural improvements to the understanding of risks, the Board recommends that the Minister of Medical Care and Sport set up an authoritative body. This body could collect information from as many sources as possible – such as academia, the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM), the Netherlands Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority (NVWA), food business operators, and consumers – and, in an independent manner, build up a comprehensive overview of emerging risks to food safety. The Minister for Medical Care and Sport should subsequently ensure that the reports are followed up as quickly as possible.

Contact

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