

From the Wings: The AVIS College Bulletin **March – April 2007**

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The Veterinarian as Guardian of the Integrated Approach to Food Safety

The role of the modern veterinarian in all links of the food chain – production, processing, and distribution - is decisive, irreplaceable and predominant.

Decisive: although many professionals are involved, directly or indirectly, in different aspects of the oversight and maintenance of food quality and safety, the veterinarian, independent of any particular link in the food chain, he/she is serving, is the only one who understands the whole of that chain in an integrated manner, from the farm to the consumer's table. This understanding derives in part from experience and in part from the broad-based and very lengthy curriculum every veterinarian is required to follow in order to qualify.

Irreplaceable: of all food professionals, the veterinarian is the only one with medical training. This training enables the veterinarian to understand the hazards and risks related to the safety of food products at the time of consumption.

Predominant: transparency and traceability are essential to protect the consumer, and these must be assured throughout the food chain. Fragmentation of the chain is a common weakness in many countries, and it is necessary to “reconnect” the pieces in a coherent and coordinated manner. The veterinarian is best placed of all professionals to take on this coordination role, and is the connecting glue that binds together the many professionals who serve each section of the food production - processing – distribution chain.

International Workshop: Thessaloniki

The professional characteristics demanded of the contemporary veterinarian are manifested in the functional requirements detailed in current European legislation. These characteristics, and their concomitant operational demands which shape the modern concepts of the role of the veterinarian in the management of food safety and quality, were reviewed and debated in depth in an international Workshop, which took place in Thessaloniki, Greece, February 11, 2007. Under the title “Veterinary interventions and regulatory aspects of the safety of foods of animal origin during primary production, processing and distribution”, the Workshop was organized by the Hellenic Veterinary Medical Society to coincide with the major exhibition “Zootechnia '07” held in Thessaloniki at the same time.

There were three sessions in the Workshop, each addressing a different topic.

Session 1: the role of the veterinarian in primary production. The morning session started with a presentation by Dr Stuart Slorach, past chairman of the EFSA Management Board, and currently chairman of the OIE (Office International des Epizooties) Working Group on Food Safety. He introduced the activities of the OIE and detailed the veterinary interventions in primary production for securing safe food products. He explained how OIE faces its emerging food safety role and how this fits within the context of the Global International regulatory framework. This was followed by three detailed presentations concerning best practices in the management of livestock production units, a presentation each on pigs, sheep

and goats and cattle. The overarching theme was the practical requirements of the veterinary management regime for the assurance of the production of safe foods.

Session 2: processing and distribution of animal origin products. In recent years we have witnessed earth-shaking changes in EU Food Legislation. The changes are the legislators' response to the repeated food crises of the 1990s. The session was opened by a presentation from Dr Periklis Kairis, an official from EU DG SANCO. Dr. Kairis gave an excellent overview of the EU regulatory provisions, how the role of national Competent Authorities is formulated, and how these provisions are related to the wider Global International regulatory framework, exercised by international organisations such as the OIE, the WHO/FAO Codex Alimentarius Commission and the World Trade Organisation. The globalization of the international food business makes such an approach essential.

A significant innovation of the new EU legislation is the implementation of the concept of self-control by the food industry. One of the primary responsibilities of the Competent Authorities at both national and international levels is oversight of the self-control system. The session concluded with a second, complementary presentation defining the role and associated responsibilities of the veterinarian in high volume food processing and distribution facilities.

Session 3: integrated systems in the management of food safety and quality. One of the possible causes of the fragmentation problem in food production is the sheer number and variety of different, specialised professionals, both within the veterinary profession itself, but also associated with other professionals in relation to aspects of food production – processing - distribution, especially those in a consumer-facing role. According to the new, integrated concept, the piecemeal approach in facing food safety issues, each professional group operating independently at the various steps of the food chain, is no longer tenable. The lack of integration causes a failure in transparency to the consumer and brings with it the risk of carrying a problem from one “link” in the chain unknowingly to the next. This “latent risk” model is completely at variance with both the prevailing law, EU Regulation 178/2002¹, but also with the spirit of transparency and traceability, as expressed in the requirement of complete, accurate information of the product journey from “farm to fork”, as the basis of a responsible and effective assessment of a food's safety up to the point of consumption. This is the foundation stone for effective protection of the consumer.

The EU legislation clearly proceeds from the view that food safety is a multidisciplinary discipline, to be practised in a concerted, system-wide manner by a wide range of professions. Consequently, there is a critical dependency across the system as a whole for efficient, well-informed communications. The objective here is interoperability, at both a technical level – systems such as computer databases able to share and exchange data – and a cultural level – professionals actively seeking to collaborate in the interest of consumer safety and of wholesome food. This topic was dealt with by the Chairman of the AVIS College, Dr Julian Hilton. The interoperability theme was reinforced by two further presentations. The first concerned the practical implementation of new approaches in food inspection. The second consisted of an overview of the complex web of international standards addressing quality

¹ **REGULATION (EC) No 178/2002 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL** of 28 January 2002 laying down the general principles and requirements of food law, establishing the European Food Safety Authority and laying down procedures in matters of food safety

and food safety, with particular emphasis on ISO 22000. The session closed with a review of mechanisms required for practical implementation of certified food safety and quality management systems.

Characteristic of the Workshop as a whole was a very high level of engagement with the challenges now facing the food safety professional, and the obligation on, but also the opportunity for the veterinarian to exercise a leadership role. Such a role would both benefit the end consumer and reinvigorate the profession itself. The discussion was so lively and insightful it continued well beyond the scheduled close.

Conclusions:

- The role of the veterinarian in securing the quality, hygiene and safety of food is changing dramatically, to embrace a system-wide coordination function and a consumer-facing information role as well as retaining more traditional animal health and welfare responsibilities.
- The focus of food inspection is widening from the traditional procedure of inspecting the end-product to include “upstream” production, starting with primary production and the control of animals ante-mortem rather than post-mortem.
- The responsibilities of the food industry for the production of safe foods is increasing, with activity currently centered on implementing self-control.
- Food inspection by Competent Authorities is changing, specifically at the central level, focusing in the surveillance of integrated food safety and quality management system, within the framework of self-control.
- The need for validated training of veterinarians in the new approaches to food safety and quality management systems is pressing.
- Equally, the need for acquiring effective communications skills allowing for the veterinarian to effectively communicate with colleagues in the profession, but also with other specialists, with the Competent authorities, with stakeholders and the general public is now understood to be essential.
- Care should be taken by Competent Authorities to make the training given to their personnel commensurate with the current requirements of their office.
- A need also exists for educational institutions to concentrate their attention more on providing students with skills in information collection, management and evaluation for problem solving, within the demands of the current regulatory framework.
- In all cases, food safety is in jeopardy if effective interoperability is not in place.



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