



Microbiology bulletin 13

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Campylobacter and chicken processing

Articles which have appeared in The Guardian newspaper over the last few weeks have provoked a reaction from the health secretary who ordered the FSA to send inspectors to audit 2 chicken processing plants.

The FSA stated that the specific problems at the plants were addressed in an appropriate manner by the business at the time and did not present a food safety risk.

However, The Guardian investigation highlighted broader concerns about practices at the plants, including chickens that have fallen onto the floor being put back on production lines. Given these allegations the FSA conducted audits and investigations at the plants on Friday 25th July.

The FSA announced on the 29th July that initial results from these two detailed and rigorous audits showed one plant as 'Good' and the 2nd plant as 'Generally Satisfactory'

The FSA reiterated advice to consumers that *Campylobacter* can occur on chickens even when the highest standards of farming and processing are followed. Consumers should follow good hygiene practice at home, including not washing raw chicken.

Campylobacter survey results published

The FSA has published the first set of quarterly results from a new survey of *Campylobacter* on fresh shop-bought chickens. The results show 59% of birds tested positive for the presence of *Campylobacter*. This is in line with previous studies which showed 65% positivity. In 4% of samples *Campylobacter* was identified on the outside of the packaging.

The survey will test 4,000 samples of whole chickens bought from UK retail outlets and smaller independent stores and butchers. The first quarter results represent 853 samples.

Catherine Brown, FSA Chief Executive, said "The low levels of contamination found on packaging, potentially indicate the effectiveness of the leak-proof packaging for poultry introduced by most retailers, which helps to reduce risks of cross contamination in consumers' kitchens. There is still a lot more to be done by all elements of the supply chain to ensure that consumers can be confident in the food they buy".

She added, 'As soon as we have enough data to robustly compare *Campylobacter* levels in different retailers we will share that data with consumers.'

The last comment is slightly contentious, as several groups are accusing the authorities of caving in to demands of retailers not to publish such potentially sensitive information, despite initially indicating that such information would be made public.

Scope to improve antibiotic prescribing

Public Health England have warned against the overprescribing of antibiotics which they believe is a contributing factor in bacteria acquiring antibiotic resistance. Professor Jeremy Hawker, a consultant epidemiologist in the field epidemiology service at PHE, who led the study, said:

“Although it would be inappropriate to say that all cases of coughs and colds or sore throats did not need antibiotics, our study strongly suggests that there is a need to make improvements in antibiotic prescribing. Previous research has shown that only 10% of sore throats and 20% of acute sinusitis benefit from antibiotic treatment, but the prescription rates we found were much higher than this. The worry is that patients who receive antibiotics when they are not needed run the risk of carrying antibiotic resistant bacteria in their gut. If these bacteria go on to cause an infection, antibiotics will then not work when the patient really does need them”.

The ability of *Salmonella* to survive in products with low water activity

Following the case of *Salmonella* in Chia seeds and the article on *Salmonella* in chocolate (mentioned in the July bulletin), there have been several recalls both in the UK, Europe and the US recently due to *Salmonella* being found in low water activity products such as Almond kernels (Germany), Paprika powder (US), and Madras Curry Powder (UK). Yet another reminder (if more were needed) that food products held at

ambient temperatures with a long shelf life, still have the potential to contain *Salmonella*.

PCA on trial

My attention was drawn to a recent headline which stated “The PCA trial begins in America”. It turned out to be not the ubiquitous and humble Plate Count Agar, but the Peanut Corporation of America. The trial of executives of the Peanut Corporation of America (PCA) has begun in Albany, Georgia. Stewart Parnell, Michael Parnell, and Mary Wilkerson are on trial for 76 felony counts that include allegations of fraud and conspiracy, obstruction of justice, and causing unbranded and adulterated peanut butter and paste to be placed in interstate commerce.

The peanut products produced by PCA were contaminated with *Salmonella*. In late 2008 and early 2009, at least 714 people were fell ill after consuming PCA products across the country. Nine people died in the outbreak.

The trial jury was told that peanut paste was shipped before the results for bacterial testing were received, with negative lab tests from earlier batches attached to reassure customers. When positive test results came back, the company did not notify its customers

***E coli* outbreak at Nottingham takeaway**

More than 100 people fell ill after an "outbreak" of *E. coli* at a Nottingham takeaway, prompting an investigation by Public Health England.

The city council shut down The Khyber Pass in Hyson Green last month after reports of 13 people falling ill.

Now it has discovered 135 cases of gastrointestinal problems, 17 of which have been confirmed as *E. coli*.