

Listeriosis outbreak shines a light on food safety in SA

The current spike in the incidences of listeriosis, the disease which is transmitted to people through contaminated food and has already led to the known deaths of more than 80 people, serves as a stark reminder of the importance of having the means to timely identify and act on food safety threats.



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“When consumers fall ill because of food contamination, prompt action to identify and isolate the food items and the facilities that processed and supplied the food, is needed to effectively deal with the threat. Such means include regulatory processes and procedures and an early warning system(s) to preferably prevent or minimise the impact of such cases,” says Dr Hennie Ras, principal specialist: traceability & operations visibility at traceability company IQ Logistica.

The Department of Health has established that the current listeriosis outbreak can be traced to a single source of food contamination, i.e. a single widely consumed food product or multiple food products produced at a single facility. However, of concern is that the health authorities have not yet been able to identify the specific foodstuff or the particular production site where the affected food was produced.

“Until the specific food source and production facility where the manufacturing happened are identified, there is not much that can be done in isolating the spread of the disease,” says Thomas Robbertse, CEO of IQ Logistica.

Efficient tracking and tracing

Ras says isolating and recalling the affected product/s in a speedily and efficient manner will depend much on the level of traceability inherent to the affected product/s.

“To efficiently and optimally track and trace the movement of product in a value chain, a flexible item instance level traceability audit trail is required that provides a real-time overview of item-handling events that specific food items are subjected to through the entire value chain, i.e. from primary production through all intermediate stages of value-add up to consumption.”

Rolf Uys, from food safety training and consulting company Entecom, says during his almost 15 years as a food safety auditor in which he audited well over 1,500 food factories, he learnt a great deal about food safety and best practices, but he also saw the dirty food safety underbelly of the industry.

“The listeriosis outbreak, which according to the World Health Organisation is the largest reported listeriosis outbreak yet, has put the spotlight squarely on the importance of food safety, which in most cases leaves much to be desired.”



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Food industry underbelly

He added that although South Africa has stringent health and safety regulations, the authorities lack the resources and infrastructure to implement them properly, which opens the door to abuse and shortcuts especially when there is pressure on the financial performance of a company.

Some of Uys's worst findings as a food safety auditor include urination inside food factories, fly maggots, mould and fermentation in product zones, insect infestation in flour silos and flour trucks, live rats/mice in production areas, dead rats in equipment and rodent droppings on raw materials, cockroaches crawling over food handling equipment, bypassing critical control points (metal detectors, sieves, pasteurizers) to increase production; and faeces behind an electrical panel.

“There are of course many more to add to the list and it is mostly centred around deep cleaning of equipment and the discipline of personnel. It should also be pointed out that these were not first-time audits of small little backyard operations - most were large, well known food manufacturers, with numerous food safety certificates. Unfortunately, if one knows where to look, the food industry is not a very hygienic place.”

The international experience shows that foodborne illnesses are on the increase. In the United States, figures from the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention show that annually roughly 1 in 6 people get sick, 128,000 are hospitalised and 3,000 die of foodborne diseases.

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