

## **THE MISSION MAY BE HAZARDOUS TO YOUR HEALTH**

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An agency mission describes the services to be rendered, and the population to be served.

Some agencies have a mission of serving and protecting the interests of the public. Other agencies owe their existence and allegiance to specific industries or segments of public interest. Whenever an agency purports to protect the interests of the public as well as protecting and enhancing the activities of some special interest group, a conflict of interest occurs. This results in the classic "fox in the hen house" syndrome. Such conflicts of interest result in the public being defrauded as well as possibly diseased or injured, rather than receiving the protection and services they rightfully deserve and understandably expect. Any agency that does not fully develop and understand the mission of protecting the health of the public and the quality of the environment, may end up actually protecting or promoting the interests of those they are charged with regulating or otherwise serving.

Agencies that deliver public health services should serve all citizens or consumers. However, as public health services have diversified to numerous agencies, important public health services have become the responsibility of agencies which are designed to protect and promote the narrower interests of agriculture, tourism, labor, or business.

Many incidents have occurred which should cause the public to be outraged. Among the more recent, several hundred cases of food borne illness occurred in Oregon among individuals who eaten inadequately cooked hamburgers at a fast food establishment in January 1993. The meat had been processed in California in a U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) inspected plant. High numbers of *E. Coli* bacteria were found to be the causative agent for the illnesses.

The conflict of interest situation in federal and state agriculture departments has been well documented for many years. When the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was created in 1970, pesticide regulation was transferred to EPA from the USDA. This solved one of the more flagrant conflict of interest organizational issues. This transfer of responsibility was in accordance with testimony and recommendations offered by representatives of the Section on Environment of the American Public Health Association to President Nixon's Committee on Executive Reorganization. The Section on Environment also recommended that all the federal food protection programs from USDA and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) be transferred to the EPA, but such transfer never occurred. At the state level, agriculture departments are still responsible for meat inspection programs, as well as pesticide regulation responsibilities. Additionally, milk sanitation is a state agriculture responsibility in many states, and there may be a trend to transfer such authority from public health agencies in other states. Other food protection activities such as restaurant sanitation and food processing establishments may also be endangered species in public health agencies. These may be candidates for fragmentation and transfer to state agriculture departments and business and professional regulation departments as occurred in Florida last year. Obviously, both of these Florida departments have missions of protecting and promoting the interests of their constituents rather than the public.

Food protection as a basic public health issues ranks among the higher environmental health and protection priorities on the basis of morbidity and mortality caused by the food supply. Such priority is much higher than most other environmental health and protection problems.

It is understandable that agriculture officials prefer to handle all food protection functions to enhance their roles of protecting and promoting agricultural interests. However, this is contradictory to the need to protect consumers from the documented disease potential of food and food products. Powerful agriculture interests have been quick to flex their political muscle defending their interests and the status quo whenever progressive changes have been proposed for USDA meat or poultry inspection procedures.

Historically, meat and poultry inspection programs have developed in accordance with USDA requirements. This inspection system is antiquated, requiring the physical presence of a meat inspector(s) before processing can commence. Other quality control procedures are minimal. Other types of food processing programs have evolved in accordance with standards promulgated by state and local health agencies, and the FDA. These programs are designed to insure the safety of such food and food products as milk, processed foods, frozen foods, fresh foods, canned foods, and packaged foods which have a high potential for creating public health problems. Such programs utilize a wide variety of quality control procedures, do not require the constant presence of inspection personnel, and have provided requisite consumer health protection. Meat and poultry inspection safeguards should be based on the public health model rather than the USDA industry model. Additionally, the taxpayers health and economic interests will be best served by organizing all food protection functions in the same consumer protection oriented agency within each jurisdiction.

Public health leadership in preventing health hazards associated with food and food products was established early in the public health movement. Food protection was among the high priority programs of many public health departments. However, public health agencies may

have taken such responsibilities for granted and ceased exerting requisite leadership for food protection as an essential public health activity as they turned their attention to other public health, and even health care, issues. Perhaps there was a foreboding of this scenario in the 1950's when California State Health Officer Malcolm Merrill noted that "our nation's food protection programs are either obsolete or are standing still." Standing still represents the status quo, and the status quo is not adequate to retain public health responsibilities in a public health agency.

All food protection programs should be lodged in agencies which have missions of consumer health protection rather than protecting and promoting the interests of any segment of public interest. Food protection includes meat inspection, pure food control, sanitation of eating and drinking establishments, poultry inspection, milk sanitation, sanitation of food processing and storage facilities, shellfish sanitation, sanitation of fish processing establishments, activities which insure compliance with pesticide and other chemical contamination requirements, as well as control of water supply, waste management, and air pollution related to the food supply.

Public health leaders must be able to define, justify, and market their product (public health) if public health agencies are to retain or regain food protection responsibilities. Public health officials must have a problem with their product, or the need for their product, or the justification and marketing of their product, or with the abilities of those charged with defining, justifying, and marketing their product.

Retaining or regaining such basic public health responsibilities will require aggressive leadership and political action on the part of the public health community. If this cannot be accomplished for something as basic as food protection, we will continue to witness the

continued diversification of numerous other public health functions to various other agencies and interest groups.

Is there a uniform definition and understanding of public health? Can public health leaders justify and market the requisite mission of consumer and public health protection? Do our public health leaders consider food protection a vital public health function, and are they willing to show political leadership for food protection issues? If the answer to any of the foregoing is "no", then we will continue to witness fragmentation of food protection responsibilities from public health agencies. The mission of other agencies may be hazardous to your health!