

Covid-19 and its impact on Food Safety

by Neil Griffiths

Bsc (Hons)., MChemA., CChem., CSci., FRSC., FIFST., FSOFHT

Director for Neil Griffiths Advisory Ltd



Can I first join with many of my professional colleagues, friends and others in applauding the amazing work being undertaken by food retailers, manufacturers and distributors both large and small in meeting the increased demand of supply to consumers of most of the essential products (if not suffering from unnecessary panic buying). I am, however, concerned of the impact Covid-19 associated with this increased level and width of activity may have on Food Safety.

The systems and procedures necessary to ensure Food Safety have been well established and refined over many years and embodied in standards, policies and protocols. However, necessary components of Food Safety Management Systems have been the evaluations that demonstrate and check that these systems and procedures are working. Retailers ensure their suppliers are properly certified and audited (either by their own auditing or via secondary or third-party auditing and certification) and through testing. Manufacturers similarly find it necessary to demonstrate by the same or similar methods that these food safety systems and procedures are working both within their businesses and by their raw material suppliers.

It is however obvious that such evaluations and auditing are being considerably curtailed given the current and future restraints that apply on international and domestic travel, social distancing, self-isolation and business curtailment. This will also impact on the level of enforcement activity. Desk top assessment are being considered as an alternative to auditing but clearly these have their limitations. Testing may also suffer due to sample availability at store, testing resource and a resistance to set aside testing samples from hard pressed production facilities and retail stores.

I am therefore concerned that in the absence of such oversight or its reduction that current commercial pressures will lead to shortcuts being taken with the potential to compromise Food Safety. The potential for the increase in fraud should also be not underestimated. It will obviously be down to Food Safety professionals within food businesses or in their absence enforcement to try and avoid such shortcuts, but this may prove difficult.

I accept that there will be some within the Food Industry that might criticise me at this time for pointing this out particularly at a time when all are so busy trying to feed the nation. Surely, they will say, the Food Industry can be trusted not only to feed the nation but also to feed it safely. I would however point out that at a time when the food industry was not under this immense pressure manufacturers found it necessary to require and provide oversight over their raw material suppliers and similarly retailers required and provided oversight over their suppliers. Whilst I am confident that many in the Food Industry will hopefully maintain and enhance their Food Safety Systems (obviously to take on board greater production volumes) an analogy springs to mind which reflects my current concerns. If you were told that the police will no longer enforce speed limits and you needed to get to work urgently would you break the speed limit?

It is important, in my view, that Food Safety professionals working within and independently of food companies should remind those that own or run them of the importance of maintaining and if anything, enhancing Food Safety Management at the time of high throughput. It is worth highlighting that according to the Food Standards Agency (FSA) 'there is about 2.4 million cases of food poisoning in the UK annually of which approximately 380,000 of these were due to Norovirus. There are approximately 500 deaths in the UK annually attributable to food poisoning'. On a global basis the World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates 'that unsafe food causes 600 million cases of food borne diseases and 420,000 deaths'.

So, what further action can the Food Industry and Enforcement take during this crisis:

- The use of Desk Top audits can be considered as a replacement for on-site audits, but this obviously has its limitations.
- Food companies should consider increasing the frequency of their internal audit programmes.
- Increasing testing of final products and raw materials should be considered.
- Rationalisation of supply lines and the number of Stock Keeping Units (SKU) should be considered.
- New supply lines need to be carefully evaluated to ensure such supply can demonstrate competent Food Safety Management.
- Obviously resist the commercial pressure to reduce or take shortcuts in your Food Safety Management systems and enhance them to reflect greater volumes where necessary.

Whilst I recognise the pressure that Covid-19 is having on the Food Industry it is worth remembering that when we emerge from the other end of this crisis Food Safety is highly likely to attract greater attention from consumers, media and government in an environment that has been further sensitised to microbiological issues. It would therefore be in the Food Industries best interests to maintain and if anything, enhance its Food Safety Management Systems during this crisis. To fail to do so is likely to cause deterioration in the hard-won improvements in Food Safety achieved by the Food Industry over the past decade and lead to an increase in food borne diseases. The correction of such is likely to prove costly when this crisis is over.