

that this question should be reconsidered in the future in the context of a periodic review of the CCH priority areas. There was consensus that regardless of whether

or not a distinct CCH priority is established, all aspects of communicable disease surveillance and control should be closely coordinated within countries.

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Food Protection Activities of the Pan American Health Organization

Foodborne illnesses constitute one of the most extensive health problems in the majority of the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. Food contamination also has an enormous economic impact, both because of direct losses due to the prodigious quantities of contaminated food that must be destroyed each year and because of the costs associated with foodborne disease. Thus, food protection can have great benefits for the health of consumers as well as the economic interests of countries.

To assist the member countries in coping with the challenge of ensuring a safe food supply, the Pan American Health Organization conducts a variety of activities within the framework of the Regional Program of Technical Cooperation in Food Protection, which is administered by the Veterinary Public Health Program. The Program acts through the Pan American Institute for Food Protection and Zoonoses (INPPAZ), located in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and through

veterinary public health and food protection consultants in the countries of the Region. INPPAZ provides laboratory support and technical cooperation for the epidemiologic surveillance of foodborne diseases. Keys to implementing the program are the development of policies, plans, and strategies; resource mobilization; information dissemination; training; direct technical assistance; and support of research activities.

In September 1986, the XXII Pan American Sanitary Conference endorsed a Plan of Action for Technical Cooperation in Food Protection for the period 1986–1990. A 1990 evaluation of the accomplishments attained under that plan disclosed that considerable progress had been made in strengthening food protection programs in Latin America and the Caribbean. Numerous national and international organizations, the food industry, and universities had participated with PAHO and technical professionals from throughout the Region in improving awareness of the importance of food protection in promoting health and stimulating economic development. Regional, subregional, and national conferences, seminars, and training courses had been held, and direct technical cooperation had been provided for updating laws and reg-

Source: Pan American Health Organization, Veterinary Public Health Program. Report on Food Protection Activities of the Pan American Health Organization. Document presented in the Eighth Session of the Codex Coordinating Committee for Latin America and the Caribbean, held in Brasília, 16–20 March 1993.

ulations, establishing information systems, stimulating epidemiologic surveillance systems for foodborne diseases, and disseminating technical information. Nevertheless, much remained to be done to develop integrated national food protection programs in the countries of the Region. Based on the results of the evaluation, the plan of action was extended to cover the period 1991–1995.

The following summary of Program activities provides an overview of PAHO's involvement in specific food protection activities in the 1990s.

Cholera Transmission by Foods

In response to the cholera epidemic that began in 1991, the Veterinary Public Health Program has undertaken a number of initiatives. A comprehensive document, "Risk of Transmission of Cholera by Foods," was developed and widely distributed. PAHO consultants have conducted studies of contamination by *Vibrio cholerae* in typical foods consumed in Bolivia, Colombia, and Peru, and have assessed laboratory capabilities in several countries for detecting cholera in food and water. In collaboration with other national and international agencies, PAHO developed a series of courses in which microbiologists representing national food protection institutions from all the countries of the Region received practical training on standard methods for detection of *V. cholerae* in foods. A technical consultation on food safety, sponsored jointly by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), PAHO, and WHO and held in Buenos Aires in April 1992, analyzed the non-tariff trade barriers established for food products and formulated technical recommendations to serve as a basis for national food marketing policies to reduce the risk of cholera transmission by foods.

Epidemiologic Surveillance of Foodborne Disease

PAHO stimulated the formation of a Working Group of experts from 10 countries to study the problem of foodborne disease in Latin America and the Caribbean and to develop a guide for investigating the occurrence of these diseases. The guide has been distributed to the countries of the Region. PAHO has also initiated activities aimed at the formation of an Inter-American Network for Epidemiologic Surveillance of Foodborne Diseases.

Street Food Vendors

The prevailing social, cultural, and economic conditions in developing countries have resulted in the proliferation of street food vendors who help feed the masses of people in congested urban and tourist areas. While street vending provides employment for unskilled or underskilled persons and is an important source of nutritious food, street foods are often sold under conditions of inadequate hygiene, which can result in foodborne disease. PAHO has developed a comprehensive analysis of the situation and continues to support activities to improve hygienic practices, education, and inspection of street food vendors.

Paralytic Shellfish Poisoning and Ciguatera

In 1987 and 1989, outbreaks of paralytic shellfish poisoning occurred in Central America and the Caribbean. In response to these incidents, PAHO sponsored a subregional seminar in October 1990 in Guatemala, which was attended by food protection officials from Central America, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Mex-

ico. The countries then established a network to strengthen national programs for surveillance and control, information sharing, and training of laboratory and food inspection personnel. The members of the network met for the first time during 1993.

Biological Residues in Meat

PAHO sponsored a 3-week course in Argentina in May 1992 on analysis of residues of anabolic agents. The course's purpose was to strengthen national capabilities to ensure safety and quality of meat products for internal consumption and export. The participants received theoretical and practical training on techniques for analysis of these residues. PAHO also helped organize a workshop on biological residue control in meat and poultry in Mexico in 1993, the purpose of which was to discuss different countries' control measures with the goal of harmonizing procedures.

National Integrated Food Protection Programs

PAHO has initiated a major project to provide direct technical cooperation to the Secretariat of Health of Mexico in order to strengthen the national food protection program. National and international consultants performed comprehensive assessments of legislation, regulations, inspection and laboratory services, foodborne disease surveillance, community participation, and the resources needed to improve the national program. This project is especially important in view of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which will facilitate commerce between Canada, Mexico, and the United States of America.

In 1991, PAHO, FAO, and the Caribbean Food and Nutrition Institute participated in a meeting in Barbados with representatives of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) to discuss ways to improve food protection in the Caribbean. The group defined strategies to improve legislation, foodborne disease surveillance, analytical services, and education. A follow-up meeting was held in May 1993 to develop a plan of action for the Caribbean countries. As part of the ongoing technical cooperation in this subregion, PAHO organized a food safety workshop, held in the Turks and Caicos Islands in November 1993, to train and update senior staff on food inspection methodologies and techniques.

Information Systems

PAHO has supported the development and utilization of computerized information systems to facilitate decision making. For example, a pilot project has been initiated in Costa Rica to develop a database of pertinent food laws and regulations. If successful, this program will be expanded into a computerized Ibero-American Network of Food Ordinances in Latin America.

Air Catering

In cooperation with the Government of Peru, PAHO sponsored the First International Seminar on Air Catering and Food Safety in April 1992 in Lima. The seminar promoted discussion of the risks of acquiring foodborne diseases during commercial airline flights. As a consequence of the seminar, the participants decided to establish the Latin American Air Caterers Association as an instrument to improve the quality of air catering within

the Region, and they also requested PAHO to produce an updated set of guidelines for adequate handling of foods by air caterers.

Food Irradiation

PAHO sponsored, jointly with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and FAO, a technical consultation at PAHO Headquarters in October 1992 on irradiation as a public health intervention measure against foodborne disease in the Region. It resulted in an agreement that PAHO, IAEA, and FAO would conduct a coordinated research program in the Americas during the following 5 years to determine the effectiveness and economic impact of irradiation to inactivate *Vibrio* spp. in raw shellfish and prevent transmission of taeniasis/cysticercosis by *Taenia solium*.

Food Protection and Tourism

In cooperation with CARICOM, FAO, WHO, the Organization of American States, the World Tourism Organization, and the Government of Mexico, PAHO organized the Inter-American Conference on Food Protection and Tourism, held in Cancún, Mexico, in November 1992. More than 200 participants, representing both the health and tourism sectors, attended the conference and issued important recommendations for tourism authorities and promoters regarding action that should be taken to prevent foodborne illness among tourists.

Action Plan for 1991–1995

PAHO has developed a comprehensive action plan to ensure progress in meeting the goals of technical cooperation in food protection during 1991–1995. The Organization is seeking to stimulate greater political support for food protection and is placing higher priority on interinstitutional/intersectoral cooperation, management and administration of programs, automation and computerization of information, and education. The plan of action is based on five components:

1. Organization of national integrated programs for food protection.
2. Strengthening of laboratory services.
3. Strengthening of inspection services.
4. Establishment of epidemiologic surveillance systems for foodborne diseases.
5. Promotion of food protection by community participation.

The action plan is being implemented by PAHO staff working with national institutions and international organizations. PAHO is also encouraging the participation of national authorities in Codex Alimentarius activities and supporting the work of Codex Committees. With WHO and FAO, PAHO will continue to organize and support regional meetings. Through concerted efforts at the international and national levels, the goal of improved food hygiene throughout the Region will be realized.