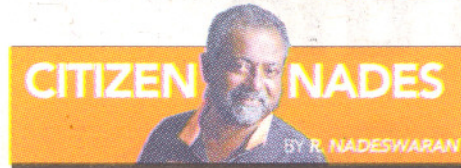


Who checks food products?



THE reporter from SkyNews was courteous when he approached Chancellor George Osborne. Producing a packet of pre-cooked Spaghetti Bolognese, he asked: "Would you feed this to your child?" The chancellor, caught off-guard did not provide an answer, but went on to say that the environment secretary is handling the matter on the highest level – at the EU.

This episode reflects the seriousness of the issue which has shaken the food industry and major retailers which was found initially in a single product in the United Kingdom and has now spread across Europe involving 28 supermarket chains in 15 countries.

Retailers started clearing their shelves of meat products but British Prime Minister David Cameron told the House of Commons that supermarkets are equally guilty. He said that it is "completely

unacceptable" that "people have been found to be eating horse when they thought they were eating beef" adding that anyone involved in passing off horsemeat as beef will face the full force of

the law.

As the slew of words continued there was more depressing news over the weekend. Horsemeat was sent to schools, colleges, hospitals, pubs and hotels, caterers admitted today, as new evidence emerged of the breadth of the adulteration of beef products across the British Isles. Cottage pies contaminated with equine DNA were recalled from 47 schools in Lancashire, while the NHS admitted that burgers tainted with horsemeat were supplied to hospitals in Northern Ireland. Whitbread – which owns Premier Inn hotel chain and Beefeater Grill and Brewers Fayre dining-based pub chains popular across the UK – disclosed that it had found horse DNA in its lasagnas and burgers.

On the home front, the Ministry of Domestic Trade, Cooperatives and Consumerism is working closely with the Ministry of Agriculture and Agro-

Based Industry in addressing the issue. Deputy Minister Datuk Rohani Abdul Karim said this is to ensure that horsemeat is not supplied to hypermarkets.

Local supermarkets have thumped their chests and declared that contaminated food products are non-existent, but no one has told us if they regularly carry out checks on products they source from their suppliers. How do they know if the pre-sealed fish balls do not contain excessive levels of boric acid? How would they know if the greens on shelves have no harmful chemicals?

It is not just horsemeat that Malaysians have to be worried about but a host of other issues such as ingredients, shelf-life, proper labelling, food handling, storage and other factors which are attributable to the quality of food.

This is not paranoia or meant to cause alarm but an article published last year in *International Food Research Journal* on local burgers makes compelling reading and for the authorities to carry out checks without waiting for an outbreak of diseases or illnesses.

Five researchers including three

from Universiti Putra Malaysia carried out tests on 112 burger patties (35 beef patties, 39 chicken patties and 38 fish patties) bought from retailers. They were tested for the presence of *Listeria monocytogenes*, a psychotropic food-borne pathogen which is widespread in the environment and in foods.

It has caused a large number of food-borne outbreaks and represents a potential threat to human health, especially to high risk groups including elderly and pregnant women.

The researchers wrote: "*Listeria monocytogenes* was detected in 33.3% of chicken burger patties, 22.9% of beef patties, and 10.5% of fish patty samples. The results suggest that burger acts as a potential source of listeriosis if the contaminated burger patty is consumed without adequate cooking. The risk associated with consumption of these samples was found to be high particularly for processed food at retail level in Malaysia."

Perhaps those entrusted with food safety may not have read that article ([www.ifrj.upm.edu.my/19%20\(04\)%202012/63%20IFRJ%2019](http://www.ifrj.upm.edu.my/19%20(04)%202012/63%20IFRJ%2019)

[www.ifrj.upm.edu.my/19%20\(04\)%202012%20Wong%20\(061\).pdf](http://www.ifrj.upm.edu.my/19%20(04)%202012%20Wong%20(061).pdf)). Lay men who read it would have avoided buying the patties.

Several questions ought to be answered by the authorities:

- ▶ Who is responsible for the quality of food on supermarket shelves?
- ▶ Who checks to ensure that food is correctly labelled?
- ▶ Are checks carried out regularly to ensure food sold is fit for human consumption?

These have to be addressed as occasionally, we read reports of vegetables being turned away at the Causeway because the Singapore authorities had found excessive pesticides in them. On being turned away, who ensures that it does not end up in our pasar malam?

We need the answers as an assurance that those entrusted with the task are doing it to the best available and required standards.

R. Nadeswaran may have unknowingly consumed food products containing horsemeat during his sojourn in London. Comments: citizen-nades@thesundaily.com