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## Chapter 12 - Role of Communication in Meat Safety

### 12.1 Introduction

No government should need reminding today that the failure to be open and honest with the public leads to mistrust and an erosion of public confidence. Disclosure is particularly important with information concerning something as fundamental as food safety.

### 12.2 Communication Concerns

At my request, a paper was prepared for the Review addressing the media's impact on public perception and policy development, particularly as it relates to meat inspection and regulation in Ontario.<sup>1</sup>

In the paper, the authors analyzed the media's reporting of the August 2003 recall of products from Aylmer Meat Packers Inc. (AMP) with particular focus on the performance of public authorities, including the provincial government. The authors noted that public communications by the provincial government came from several spokespersons from various ministries, provided limited and somewhat contradictory information and attempted to deflect responsibility for responding to the recall. The authors suggest that the problem with the provincial government's communications during the AMP recall included:

- inaccurate, contradictory and incomplete information, especially in the initial stages;
- constantly changing information; and
- a breakdown of normal channels of communication.

The authors noted that an information vacuum throughout the crisis resulted in suspicion and confusion which, in turn, damaged consumer and business confidence.

The paper also included a discussion of the consequences of a month-long failure of the Belgian government to disclose to the public that dioxin had entered the food chain through animal feed. The authors conclude that the

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<sup>1</sup> D. Powell et al., *The impact of media on public perception and policy development related to meat inspection in Ontario* (June 2004), [hereinafter the Powell Report].

failure to inform the public promptly resulted in accusations of a cover-up. The government's crisis management and communication strategy became the focus of criticism and damaged public confidence in both the food system and the government.

The AMP and Belgian incidents demonstrate that responsible management of a crisis not only requires timely action to reduce and mitigate risks to public health, but also includes the prompt and accurate disclosure of its nature. Otherwise, the public will assume the worst.<sup>2</sup> The authors of the media paper make the following observations:

*The Aylmer incident and the Belgian dioxin crisis illustrate many common mistakes in crisis communication. Lack of prompt communication with the media, even when there isn't very much information available, or appearing defensive, may lead media and critics to assume the organization is denying or downplaying the existence of a problem. Failure to address the perceived problem, no matter how large the problem actually is, may result in the public turning against the organization. The organization will be criticized throughout the crisis and trust and credibility will be very difficult to regain. If the organization does not create its own message on its own terms about the real issues at stake, another message will be created by others, perhaps with a vested interest, which may or may not be truthful. The result is confusion and contradiction between the organization and the media throughout the crisis.<sup>3</sup>*

In Ontario and Belgium, failure to appreciate these principles at the outset resulted in a focus on government mismanagement and public concern about food safety, rather than on the issues that gave rise to the food safety incident. Steps should be taken to avoid such a result in the future.

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<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 22 & 23.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 23; V. Covello, *Risk Communication Paper, Opening the Black Box Risk Conference*, McMaster University (1995).

### 12.3 An Informed Public

Our governments play an important role in providing information and education to the public on food safety related issues. This process is not restricted to formal education and training strategies, but rather extends to all communications by the provincial government including those during a crisis or in consultations during policy development.<sup>4</sup>

If the government provides regular, consistent and accurate messages in its communication with the public, there is a strong likelihood that the public will understand food safety related risks and issues. The messages should be consistent as between all government agencies – agriculture, food and health. Some of the key messages the provincial government should communicate include:

- meat in Ontario is produced according to appropriate standards of food safety and has been subject to a reasonable level of inspection and testing;
- the safety of meat can be safeguarded by ensuring that it is produced and handled by workers who are appropriately trained and supervised;
- the safety of meat can be enhanced by a well-trained inspectorate;
- the safety of meat can be assured by appropriate preparation and handling by consumers;
- consumers should make informed choices in terms of where they buy their meat and how they handle, prepare and store their meat;
- essential to the safety of our meat is the provision of appropriate resources by the provincial government;
- essential to the safety of our meat is a good science and research capability and a strong and effective regulatory system;
- the food safety system must be under constant review and scrutiny in order to respond to new challenges; and

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<sup>4</sup> The issues relating to formal education and information programs for the public are reviewed in Chapter 10.

- foodborne illnesses remain a significant public health concern and a good food safety system will help reduce illness, resulting in significant economic and non-economic benefits.

An informed public, through consistent, repeated and regular communication, is the foundation for developing good food safety policy and responding to a crisis in a measured and responsible manner.

## 12.4 Food Safety Policy Development

As noted in Chapter 3 of this Report, in recent years, the provincial government has failed to adequately articulate its vision, strategies and plans for food safety. It has failed to communicate to the public that it has developed specific plans and undertaken initiatives to improve food safety. The provincial government expended large sums of money for these purposes without publicly reporting on how they were being spent, and mysteriously, has not provided information to the public about much of the good work and systemic improvements which have already been accomplished.

The Ministry of Agriculture and Food (OMAF) has participated in consultative communications with the industry and stakeholders with respect to proposed changes to the food safety programs over the last five years.<sup>5</sup> However, a number of submissions to the Review expressed a desire for more regular communication by and dialogue with OMAF regarding the development of regulations and policies, as well as other food safety initiatives.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Examples of the consultation include the following. Consultation papers were developed and sent to industry and other stakeholders prior to the introduction of the *Food Safety and Quality Act, 2001* and changes to the livestock community sales program. OMAF consulted industry during studies regarding the deadstock industry, the non-federally registered fish processors and the costs to upgrade plants. The consultations with respect to the *Food Safety and Quality Act, 2001* in 2001 detailed proposed changes to the system which have not yet been implemented as the Act has not yet been proclaimed and some of the concern expressed was whether those changes communicated at that time and evidenced by that Act are still planned or whether different changes are planned.

<sup>6</sup> For example, the Ontario Independent Meat Processors and a number of public health organizations.

The development of food safety policy by the provincial government is influenced by good science and by social and economic factors including public opinion and the public's willingness to see limited resources allocated to food safety initiatives. In order to provide a world-class food safety system, the provincial government must candidly communicate to all stakeholders, in a timely manner. The communication must clearly articulate the province's vision and goals for its food safety system, the current shortfalls in the system and steps that are planned to remedy them.

The development of policy also requires the undertaking of risk analysis which includes risk communication. Effective communication of information and opinion on risks associated with real or perceived hazards in food is an integral component of the risk analysis process required in the development of food safety policy. It is not an option; it is an essential element.

The fundamental goal of risk communication is more widely understood and accepted risk management decisions. This requires that the government engage in the exchange of meaningful, relevant and accurate information, in clear and understandable terms with a specific audience in mind. The information is provided so that government, industry and the public can make informed choices about the risks involved in undertaking certain activities. Effective risk communication should endeavour to build and maintain trust and confidence. It should facilitate a higher degree of consensus and support by all interested parties for the risk management options being proposed.<sup>7</sup> Building trust and managing the public's perception of risk is a challenge for any government.

Risk communications should inform thinking throughout the risk analysis process and to do so, it needs to be an interactive process.<sup>8</sup> It should apply to the full range of government activities, including the development of

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<sup>7</sup> Powell Report, *supra* note 1, p. 7; J. Chartier and S. Gabler, CFIA, *Risk Communication and Government; Theory and Application for the Canadian Food Inspection Agency*, (2001), available from

[http://www.inspection.gc.ca/english/corpaffr/publications/riscomm/riscomm\\_ese.shtml](http://www.inspection.gc.ca/english/corpaffr/publications/riscomm/riscomm_ese.shtml)

<sup>8</sup> J. Chartier and S. Gabler, CFIA, *Risk Communication and Government; Theory and Application for the Canadian Food Inspection Agency*, *supra* note 7, Ch. 2; See also discussion of risk analysis in Chapter 3 of this Report.

policy and regulations, program implementation and evaluation, research and analysis, and enforcement and compliance efforts.

The media's wide reach and influence on public perception make it an important vehicle for risk communication.<sup>9</sup> While many think of the media as narrators of events such as foodborne illness outbreaks, food recalls, health advisories and food warnings, their role is far greater. The media is a powerful vehicle for the delivery of health risk information and advice to the public. This communication can be positive and effective if clear, accurate, balanced and complete or damaging if the communication is confusing, biased, inaccurate or incomplete. If the information from the government is stale, incomplete or inaccurate, there is a substantial risk that the media's message will be distorted or incomplete and negatively impact the development of food safety public policy.<sup>10</sup>

For these reasons, it is important that the provincial government and, in particular, all of the ministries involved in food safety have a clear, coordinated communications strategy and protocol to ensure that there is a timely system to provide ongoing information to the media on food safety issues. Good public policy can be made if the public is well informed and is willing to support government initiatives and the associated expenditures of tax dollars.

## 12.5 Crisis Communication

Communication is especially important in circumstances where an adverse event has occurred or is threatened. In a crisis, there is a danger that the media and the public may stigmatize the hazard and assume that the health risks are more serious and harmful than they are in fact. In addition, the media and the public often become distracted by collateral issues relating to the government's management of the crisis, including issues such as conflicts of interest and the application of proper values and precautions,

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<sup>9</sup> Powell Report, *supra* note 1, p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13 & 14.

rather than on the actual level of risk posed by the hazard and what is being done to control it.<sup>11</sup>

Effective communication will help ensure that:

- the incident or event does not rise to the level of a crisis unless warranted by its actual severity;
- the impact of the incident on the public, industry and government is kept to a minimum;
- the provincial government, as a regulator of food safety, establishes control over the incident and any risks associated with it;
- incident-related messages are accurately and quickly transmitted, received, understood and believed;
- the provincial government is accurately perceived as caring, concerned and taking appropriate action to correct the situation; and
- incident-related messages result in meaningful and appropriate actions.<sup>12</sup>

Ineffective communication can:

- raise levels of public anxiety, concern and fear and fuel false rumours;
- result in inaccurate perceptions of risk;
- result in exaggerated allegations and claims;
- result in injury and harm to the public and industry;
- create unfairly negative images of the provincial government; and
- result in loss of public confidence in the safety of our food.<sup>13</sup>

The public expects government to be ready to respond appropriately to any emergency or crisis. Communication is an important part of the response expected in a time of potential crisis. Several stakeholders suggested that the provincial government did not have or use a good communication

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11; V. Covello, *Risk Communication Paper, Opening the Black Box Risk Conference*, *supra* note 3.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

strategy during recent meat safety events. The news reports of those events appear to support their contention.

The *Interim Report of the SARS Commission* has identified Ontario's lack of public health communication strategy as a problem.<sup>14</sup> Justice Campbell notes, and I believe correctly, that a public health crisis creates a strong demand for credible public information.<sup>15</sup> Meat safety is, of course, an important public health concern.

A potential crisis related to meat safety will likely involve many different government agencies including OMAF, the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, the Ministry of Natural Resources, Boards of Health, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, and Health Canada, each with roles and responsibilities which may overlap. There is a need for government to communicate to the public in a clear and coordinated fashion,<sup>16</sup> despite any overlapping jurisdiction.

Measures should be put in place to ensure that the public is provided with timely, complete, consistent and accurate information. One government agency should take responsibility for communicating with the public in each incident and all government authorities involved in managing meat safety incidents should include, within their emergency preparedness plans, a clear communication strategy and protocol.

The meat safety system in Ontario will be the better for it.

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<sup>14</sup> Ontario, *The SARS Commission Interim Report: SARS and Public Health in Ontario* (15 April 2004) p. 56.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>16</sup> Powell Report, *supra* note 1.