

12 deaths in Canada linked to listeria outbreak in meat products

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A listeria bacterial contamination traced back to a Toronto, Ontario, food processing plant has been linked to the deaths of at least 12 people across Canada. Dozens more have been sickened by the infection.

Experts predict that, as listeriosis has a long incubation period, many more infections could surface over the next few weeks. Particularly vulnerable to the bacteria are the elderly, young children and people with immune deficiency issues.

As the outbreak widens, Maple Leaf Foods, owned by billionaire Wallace McCain, and one of the largest meat-packing and food-processing companies in Canada, has withdrawn all 220 meat products produced at its Toronto processing facility from store shelves. An initial recall on August 17 pulled only 2 ready-to-eat products from the market. The list of suspect meat products was then increased to 23 before the company decided to pull its entire line of packaged meats earlier this week.

McCain, aided by the Ontario Teachers Pension Plan, purchased Maple Leaf Foods in 1995 and immediately moved to rationalize its holdings, buy out its competitors and cut the wages and staffing levels at its packing and processing facilities. A bitter 12-month strike in 1997-1998 resulted in an agreement between the United Food and Commercial Workers union and the company for a 40 percent wage cut, further job reductions and the closure of the Edmonton plant.

Editorial comment in the mainstream media has hailed the “proactive” way that Maple Leaf has handled the current incident. The company has predicted that it stands to lose at least C\$20 million due to the recall.

Federal Conservative Health Minister Tony Clement, who was at the Democratic National Convention in Denver, Colorado, during the crisis, hailed the government’s response to the outbreak. “The

surveillance system picked up a problem that was occurring and allowed us to respond efficiently and effectively to an emerging public health issue. This is an example of where our surveillance system worked.”

A dozen people dead, dozens more sickened and more cases to come—one wonders what result the minister might consider a failure.

An examination of the circumstances around the incident raises a number of serious questions about the efficacy of the food safety system in Canada. Federal health authorities began to suspect as early as mid-July that a dangerous bacterial infection had developed in a Toronto nursing home. By the end of July, authorities had determined that the Toronto infections were part of a much larger province-wide outbreak. Maple Leaf Foods itself had been notified by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) that at least some of its products were suspected of contamination four full days before the company issued its first public warning.

Only 2 percent of all food products in Canada are monitored by inspectors prior to distribution to the general public. Michele Demers, the president of the union that represents federal food inspectors, blames lack of staff for the growing problem of food supply contaminations. “Inspecting the products before they make it to the stores, before people can actually purchase them, those are the audits that aren’t being made. Those are the audits that aren’t being made because they’re too short-staffed.”

Last month, a secret cabinet document leaked to the press noted that the Conservative government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper was considering handing over inspection responsibilities directly to the food companies, taking the government inspectors off the production lines and reducing their role to one of “oversight.” The plan would also cut millions of dollars

in funding to test cattle for BSE (Mad Cow Disease).

Government officials were clearly worried about the public reaction to the draconian proposals put forth by the agriculture minister, Gerry Ritz. In explaining the delay in implementing the proposals, Treasury board Secretary Wayne Wouters wrote, “the announcement of these reallocations has been deferred owing to significant communications risks and to allow further policy and communications work to be completed.”

But in a report in Wednesday’s *Globe and Mail* newspaper, it now appears that crucial portions of the government’s new policy were already being implemented as early as last year! According to Richard Arsenault, a manager at CFIA, and Bob Kingston, a former CFIA inspector and current president of the Agriculture union within the Public Service Alliance of Canada, full-time production-line inspections by food inspectors at the Toronto plant have not been conducted for some time.

Rather, a solitary inspector, who also has responsibility for six other facilities, was reduced to auditing company paperwork attesting to their own safety precautions. “We don’t swab for listeria anymore. The industry does all that themselves,” said Kingston. “They just document all this stuff. We read their reports. If their reports say they do everything fine, then they do everything fine.” Kingston noted that under the new system, inspectors no longer watch whether plant workers properly sanitize equipment nor do they spend much time at all on the plant floor. “By the time they finish doing the paperwork they’ve got very little time to actually look at anything and it bothers them.”

Food microbiologists have suggested that the Maple Leaf listeria contamination would have required an extremely high presence of the bacteria on equipment inside the plant. More than a billion cells are required within a meat product to cause illness. Pasteurizing the finished meat product, a proven safeguard against listeria, has never been adopted by companies in Canada, nor have Canadian governments required its implementation.

The food inspection scandal follows closely on the tail of the massive propane explosion earlier this month in Toronto. In that incident, it was also revealed that privatization measures regarding safety inspections pushed through by the provincial Conservative

government last decade and continued by the current Liberal administration led to a systemic failure of oversight and follow-up of industry violations over an extended period. This same philosophy of privatizing safety-inspection processes directly resulted in the Walkerton e. Coli water contamination scandal in 2000 that led to the deaths of seven people and the severe illness of hundreds of others in the small, southeastern Ontario town. Three current federal cabinet ministers, including Clement, were officials in the Ontario government of Mike Harris at the time of that tragedy.



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