Canadian Medical Association Journal attacks Harper government for listeria epidemic

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The Canadian Medical Association Journal, one of the world's top medical publications, has made a scathing attack on Canada's Conservative government, charging that "government policy errors helped bring about" the recent epidemic of listeriosis that has so far killed 17 people across Canada and sickened scores more.

The editorial in the current *CMAJ* issue, dated October 7, 2008, says the recent changes to the government's monitoring of processed meat products severely weakened safety standards, notes that Canada has lower listeria standards than many other countries, and calls for a full public inquiry into the failings of Canada's food inspection system.

Published in the midst of the campaign for Canada's October 14 federal election, the *CMAJ* editorial and an accompanying article on listeria have served to again highlight the damaging impact draconian cuts in government services and the gutting of regulations are having on people's lives.

Amir Attaran, a member of the *CMAJ* Editorial Board and co-author of the editorial, has bluntly stated, "The fact is, this outbreak was 100 percent avoidable and unnecessary."

The listeria outbreak, which erupted only a few months after the federal government began to introduce new laxer inspection rules, is the worst recorded anywhere in the world. It was traced to a Toronto plant owned by Maple Leaf Foods. Canada's largest food processing company, Maple Leaf is owned by one of Canada's richest individuals, billionaire Wallace McCain.

Even now there is considerable cause for concern, since listeria bacteria can remain latent for at least 3 months. As the current outbreak is only about five or six weeks old it is highly possible it will claim more lives, render others ill, and induce more miscarriages.

Those most susceptible to infection are newborns and children as well as the elderly. Persons with immune deficiencies such as HIV, cancer, diabetes and kidney disease are also at significantly increased risk. Listeria is among the most virulent food-borne pathogens with 20 percent of clinical infections resulting in death.

It is well documented that processed "cold cut" meats are a high risk food in terms of listeriosis infection.

The fatalities attributable to the listeria outbreak are now more than double those caused by the waterborne *E. coli* outbreak in Walkerton, Ontario in 2000. That calamity saw seven people die and hundreds more fall seriously ill after cuts to water inspection processes implemented by the provincial Conservative government of Mike Harris.

The authors state that in the Walkerton and Maple Leaf cases, as well as the 2003 SARS outbreak in Toronto that killed forty-three people and threw the city into panic, "systemic failures across multiple levels" were to blame.

In the current case, it is vital to note that Maple Leaf Foods was an early adopter of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency's (CFIA) new sampling procedure under which the company only had to test its finished products once per month. To date, as the *CMAJ* editorial notes, the government has done virtually nothing in response to the listeria epidemic other than mount a food-products recall.

Just prior to calling the election, Prime Minister Harper did call an independent investigation into the listeriosis epidemic. But this came only in response to a spate of damning leaks from food inspectors. These leaks not only highlighted the secrecy imposed by the Harper Government around the implementation of the inspection changes; they also exposed how the government had weakened CFIA inspection standards and turned over responsibility for product safety to the food companies themselves.

The *CMAJ* editorial notes "officials praise the success of our infectious disease surveillance system—as if with 16 [now 17] dead, there were cause to celebrate—while food safety standards remain as low as ever."

Moreover, the mandate the government has given the inquiry into the listeria outbreak makes clear that its real

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purpose is to provide the government with a political cover. The investigator will have no power to subpoena witnesses or documents, the investigation will not be public, and there is no commitment to publishing the findings or report them to parliament!

In November 2007, the Canadian government instituted a review of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. As a result of this review the government began changing the way meat is inspected, transferring inspection duties from government employees to the meat industry. Under this policy change, CFIA inspectors rarely enter the meat-processing plants to test for bacterial infestation. A copy of the minutes of the Treasury Board meeting in March 2008 nakedly lays out the government's goal, to shift "from full-time CFIA meat inspection presence to an oversight role, allowing industry to implement food safety control programs and to manage key risks."

Under the Harper government's direction, the CFIA also lobbied for the US to lower its own listeria standards, opposing daily visits by inspectors to processing plants and daily "finished product testing" for listeria. The *CMAJ* says such safeguards would have likely avoided or reduced the impact of the outbreak at Maple Leaf Foods.

Currently, the Canadian Government's national standards for listeria are lower than those of many other countries. Health Canada's requirements state that up to 100 listeria bacteria per gram can be tolerated at the start of the life of a "ready to eat" meat product. When finally ingested, the content may be higher as the bacteria can replicate during the life of the product, even when it is refrigerated.

World Health Organisation standards however deem acceptable only a standard of 100 bacteria per gram *at the end* of a product's life. The US has even stricter inspection standards, requiring that no listeria bacteria be present. The US has experienced a decreased prevalence of listeria infection and mortality since the 1990s, though the number of persons infected is still in the range of 2,500 per year.

At the behest of big business, the Harper government has overseen significant attacks on public health in the 31 months since it came to power. As the listeria epidemic attests, the weakening of safety testing and testing-standards in the name of saving government money has already resulted in substantial harm to human health.

The forthright condemnation of the government by the *CMAJ* is all the more remarkable considering the journal went through a major crisis in February 2006 after the leadership of the Canadian Medical Association complained that the journal was too politically controversial.

Two *CMAJ* editors were fired and the majority of the editorial board subsequently resigned in a dispute over the journal's independence, after the Canadian Medical Association CEO expressed alarm at an unflattering profile on the journal's web site of the new Conservative Health Minister, Tony Clement, and his support for greater private sector, for-profit involvement in health care.

Clement, who remains the federal Health Minister, was a key figure in the Ontario Tory Government of Mike Harris. He was known for removing barriers to private companies gaining access to the public health care system. Further, Clement was the Health Minister in Ontario during the SARS epidemic and the Municipal Affairs Minster in Ontario during the Walkerton *E. coli* epidemic. During Walkerton, Clement defended the private sector's shocking mismanagement of the water system that directly contributed to the outbreak. At the outset of the listeria epidemic, Clement was severely criticized for continuing his junket to Denver, Colorado to watch the Democratic National Convention even as the body count began to rise.

In a more recent development that further demonstrates the government's indifference to the tragedy, Agricultural Minister Gerry Ritz has been forced to apologize for several tasteless jokes he made during a ministry conference call organized to discuss the government's response to the epidemic. Ritz stated, "This is death by a thousand cuts. Or should I say cold cuts." When told about a new death from the epidemic in Prince Edward Island (PEI), he remarked, "Please tell me its Wayne Easter," the Liberal party's critic shadowing Ritz's Agriculture Department, who hails from PEI.

This further highlights that the government's principal concern in the listeria epidemic has been limiting the political fallout and instilling false public confidence in Canada's meatpacking companies.

The gutting of the inspection system is part of the ongoing deregulation of industry and program of budget-cutting that has been pursued for the past two decades by all governments, federal and provincial. Both the SARS and Walkerton tragedies, like the current listeria epidemic, were the outcome of these socially regressive policies.

Moreover, as the *CMAJ* notes, the current outbreak of listeriorsis may be just the beginning. The same reductions in inspection standards were implemented in the animal feed mills of the nation. Tainted animal feed can lead to epidemics of bovine spongiform encephalitis (BSE) or mad cow disease. Warns the *CMAJ*, "Canada is now less prepared for epidemics than in the past."

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