Food safety – consumer concerns

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Keywords

Food, Consumer attitudes, Consumer panels

Abstract

Outlines the findings of a simple piece of research into consumers’ greatest concerns over food. Using the Scottish Consumer Council’s Consumer Network as a sample, each was asked to complete a questionnaire asking about the three issues which gave them greatest concern. Food hygiene standards, GM foods, and the use of chemicals, pesticides and additives came out very strongly. Other issues are also listed. Overall there was an overwhelming feeling by consumers that they did not have all the information and knowledge and there was much confusion about the facts.

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The MAFF Consumer Panel was set up in November 1989. The Panel meets four times a year, usually in London, and meetings are chaired by the Minister for Food Safety, currently Baroness Hayman.

The Consumer Panel’s terms of reference are to:

(1) bring to the attention of Ministers food issues of concern to consumers;
(2) advise on the transparency for consumers of Ministers’ food policies;
(3) advise on the transmission to consumers of advice and information relating to Ministers’ policies on food safety, diet and nutrition.

The Panel consists of ten members who may be nominated by consumer organisations. However, they are appointed in a personal capacity to represent the views of ordinary consumers. Panel members are actively encouraged to suggest items for discussion at meetings and to produce their own discussion papers.

In an effort to identify food issues which concern the ordinary consumer, I enlisted the help of the Scottish Consumer Council’s Consumer Network, a group of about 80 volunteers who help to keep SCC in touch with consumer concerns at local level, by identifying local consumer issues on a regular basis.

It is important to bear in mind that the Network is a small and not necessarily representative sample of Scotland’s population. However, in appointing Network volunteers, every effort is made to maintain a balance. Volunteers are to be found in all parts of Scotland, both urban and rural, and are as widely representative as possible in terms of gender, age and background.

The Network volunteers send in an information form three times a year, telling about any consumer issues that concern them or their local community. Occasionally they are asked to concentrate on one particular topic. Recently they were asked to identify their concerns about food. The response was so great that SCC decided to follow this up with a food questionnaire for completion by the volunteers. A total of 61 members responded.

The views expressed in the questionnaires are those of members of SCC’s Consumer Network and are not necessarily the views of SCC. I gratefully acknowledge the help of the Scottish Consumer Council in allowing me input into their questionnaire and in passing on the results.
SCC offered me some input into the food questionnaire and I requested the following question: “What three issues give you most concern about food safety, and why?”

The questionnaire was completed by the volunteers in July 1999.

The results are as follows.

Food hygiene standards both of food suppliers such as shops and restaurants, and in the home are the major concern, mentioned by almost 50 per cent.

Comments include:

How can consumers be certain that the food purchased (whether in a shop, restaurant, etc.) has been prepared not only by someone qualified in food hygiene procedures, but also by someone who has followed these rules meticulously?

Bacterial infection is a concern to all those who prepare food even in the home.

People know what they should do, but choose not to.

I used to sell catering equipment to hotels, butcher shops, restaurants. Therefore I tend not to eat out if I can help it. Despite the white hats and coats – kitchens break hygiene rules all the time.

Bread and bakery items – in small shops this is uncovered and open to flies, dust, dirt, coughs and sneezes.

Personal hygiene of staff and practices which are less than satisfactory – a large and well-regarded bakery/patisserie allows its counter assistants to handle food and cash.

Genetically modified food concerns 40 per cent of the respondents. Comments include:

GM foods – don’t know enough about them. Scared at times that I may be unknowingly buying them.

GM food – Don’t know much about it as Government and other consumer bodies aren’t making customers aware of what it entails.

I believe genetic modification could be useful, but its development needs to be properly researched and controlled.

GM food concerns me as we are not sure of the long-term effects of this practice.

GM crops – we have been accepting this from the USA for some time, and it seems impossible to gauge how much and how many things have already been tainted.

Until further research is done I don’t think we should be eating GM foods. I am worried about the threat to native species from GM crops.

The consumer has no choice in the matter, not just because much soya is GM, but also because there is no labelling. We have no idea what the health risks are, and I personally do not like the idea of nature being “tampered with”, for no good reason I can see, other than profit.

Chemicals, pesticides and additives also concern 40 per cent:

Not really knowing how our food has been interfered with during production and what additional pesticides, fertilisers, antibiotics or growth hormones may have been used. When harvested has our food been treated with preservative or waxed, etc. to improve the look and extend the shelf life? Can all these additives be removed by a good washing?

Can we really trust the producers and farmers to adhere to all the safety rules?

The use of pesticides and other chemicals on vegetables and fruit. Don’t want my children eating them.

I am concerned about fruit being “treated” to give it a longer shelf life (might not have the same benefit for customers!)

Are so-called “healthy” salads such as lettuce safe to eat?

Contamination of food stuffs with pesticides – are testing procedures adequate and safety limits properly set? Past experience has shown these not to be. Are penalties for misuse high enough to be a deterrent?

Antibiotics and growth hormones given to animals – I worry that through eating meat and farmed fish we are becoming increasingly resistant to antibiotics with the subsequent danger of “superbugs”.

Other issues raised include:

- Importing of contaminated foods and general lack of control – “We accept meat, etc. from countries whose hygiene is not as good as ours.”
- Food allergies – accurate labelling essential. “Incorrect information can be fatal.”
- E.Coli/Salmonella/Campylobacter – “food poisoning due to increased infection in farm animals – very difficult to combat if anywhere along the food pathway strict food hygiene standards are not observed.”
- BSE/CJD – “I won’t give my kids beef purely because of this issue.”
- Intensive farming/battery farming – “production methods for animal-based foods (meat, eggs, dairy) are so disgusting that no one should be surprised about the BSE/E. coli/Dioxin scares. If cheapness is the only criterion at every stage, we can only expect to eat rubbish.”
- School meals – are they thoroughly cooked?
- Inadequate labelling, e.g. Aspartame, the food sweetener – “lack of warning of its effects on children under three years of age”.
- Raw meat – cooking instructions – “on inside of packet or sometimes on bottom of pack – turn meat in a pack upside down and get covered in blood.”
- Synthetic flavours, colours, etc. – “I wonder at the ever-increasing use of synthetic flavours, colours, preservatives, etc. which would be unnecessary if we curbed the production/availability of foodstuffs which require their
use. I am amazed to find bakery products, for instance, with a shelf life of six weeks! My baking certainly won’t last that long, but I am pretty certain it will not have any side-effects. Children seem to be increasingly allergic to all sorts of things and I wonder if there is a link.”

- **Lack of adherence to sell-by dates** – “I always check these as on quite a few occasions I have discovered I had bought out-of-date items.”
- **Salt** – health risk?
- **Food freshness** – or lack of it. “Freshness is of concern to me, especially freezer foods and fresh meats.”
- **Healthy food – expensive.** “Fruit is too expensive for those living on a small income.”
- **Power of the supermarkets** – “Pressure put on suppliers by supermarkets to produce products at the lowest price yet ensure the highest standard of food safety – this is a real conflict of interest.”
- **Toddler's choking on lollies and gob-stoppers** – “I really don’t think they should be sold to young children.”
- **Increasing dependence on pre-prepared foods** – “whether it’s meat pies from a local butcher or an ‘exotic’ meal from a supermarket, one bug in the production line = a lot of sick people.”

A minority of the respondents are relatively unconcerned about anything:

Nothing bothers me about food safety.

People in the western world are living longer and enjoying relatively good health . . . as food is plentiful and affordable.

I have no concerns about food safety. We set high standards in this country, providing suppliers, etc. adhere to best practice in handling.

I believe that “cleanliness is next to dirtiness” and that the search for absolute purity and absolute safety is a chimera – an impossibility.

In another part of the questionnaire, respondents were asked for their opinions on a number of specific food issues, for example:

- 88 per cent admit to being confused about the safety of GM foods.
- 88 per cent support a moratorium on the production of GM foods while further research is carried out.
- 79 per cent agree that it is difficult to know which foods are safe.
- 77 per cent think that the number of cases of food poisoning is increasing.
- 63 per cent feel that the media are guilty of scaremongering over food safety issues.
- 62 per cent believe that the government does not handle food safety issues effectively.

They were asked where does the responsibility for food safety lie? Nearly half gave almost equal responsibility to the five groups specified: the Government, farmers, food processors, retailers, and the people who prepare the food. It was felt that people who prepare the food have most responsibility for food safety.

The results of the questionnaire were discussed by the Consumer Panel at its meeting on 19 October 1999. This was an open meeting, and a large number of invited guests who had expressed an interest in attending joined in the debate. Many of the issues have been discussed in the past by the panel, and will merit further consideration and discussion.

For example:

1. Is it true that the number of food poisoning cases is increasing? Or is it just that in the less scientific past they were not identified as such?
2. Much publicity is now given to the need for adequate hygiene measures in food handling and preparation. So, if food poisoning is on the increase, why?
3. Can fruit and vegetables really be rendered safe by “a good washing”? What constitutes “a good washing”?
4. Does eating healthily really cost more?
5. Imported foods – what controls are in place to prevent contaminated foodstuffs from abroad entering our food chain?
6. Labelling of products – how can we ensure that labels contain all the information the consumer needs?

**Conclusion**

This paper is intended simply to identify food safety issues which concern the ordinary consumer. While a wide variety of issues is raised, what comes through clearly from the responses overall is that the consumer is concerned about a lack of information, a lack of knowledge and feelings of confusion about the facts. “I don’t know”, “I wish to know”, “I am not sure”, “Can we be sure?”, are commonly used comments.

One respondent sums it up:

I feel that too often food issues are presented to the public without a full and easy-to-understand explanation. The result is fear, confusion, ignorance . . .

I hope it will be possible to repeat this questionnaire in a year or two, and compare the results. Will food hygiene standards have improved? Will the same concerns about food safety be expressed? Will there be new concerns? Will the new Food Standards Agency have boosted consumer confidence? (Incidentally, 82 per cent of the respondents had heard of the proposed FSA.)