Listeriosis outbreak reveals SA's need for a designated food control agency

With over 720 laboratory-confirmed cases of food poisoning caused by Listeria in 2017, South Africa is in dire need of a food control agency which can better manage the threat presented by Listeriosis, and risks associated with all foodborne diseases, moving forward.

©Udo Herrmann via 123RF

This is according to Gareth-Lloyd Jones, executive director of Ecowize, a hygiene and sanitation service provider for the food, pharmaceutical and healthcare industries.

The bacteria (Listeria) can be found in food products including animal products such as cold cut and convenience-style meats, poultry and raw or unpasteurised milk, as well as certain fruits and vegetables, improperly fermented silage, raw and treated sewage. In the vast majority of reported Listeriosis outbreaks and cases of recall around the world, the source has been either dairy products, fresh produce products and RTE (Ready to Eat) products, but mainly products that get consumed without any further cooking process.

Lack of professionalism

Lloyd-Jones notes that the outbreak of Listeriosis needs to be taken far more seriously by the industry. He says, "The way in which the Department of Health handled the temporary shutdown of Sovereign Foods (a poultry abattoir which supplies a shop where Listeria had been detected) lacked the decorum, professionalism and integrity required in these situations."

What we really need at this time, says Lloyd-Jones, is the introduction of a dedicated food control agency, rather than the array of unlinked food safety laws, mandated by different directorates, which have proven to be difficult to enforce and police.

"In the Sovereign Foods case, for example, the highly valuable and credible information provided by the National Institute of Communicable Diseases (NICD) was used irresponsibly. Simply stating that the premises has now been found to comply with requirements to resume food preparation is hardly adequate in terms of presenting the industry in a fully transparent manner."

Severe ST6 strain

Highlighting the magnitude of the problem facing the country, Lloyd-Jones explains that nine out of 10 cases of Listeriosis in South Africa have been identified as 'ST6' - the strain which has been noted globally as severe and fatal.

"This is largely due to the ST6 strain being more resistant to traditional treatment. However, the prevalence of the single strain also suggests that the outbreak can most likely be traced back to a single source and product that is widely consumed by a variety of socio-economic groups and is used in the manufacture of a host of other widely consumed products, meaning that it should be somewhat easier to locate if the appropriate process is followed."

Listeriosis outbreak shines a light on food safety in SA
24 Jan 2018

"The department, media and the industry itself have placed all attention on Sovereign Foods, disregarding the fact that the bacteria may have manifested during the production of other high-risk products such as cream or cheese, or even during the packaging process. Currently, with the potential of food safety processes falling to the wayside, we are actually unaware of whether the outbreak may even be linked to food products imported from elsewhere in the world as there is no legal requirement for Listeria testing of these products to comply with their importation certificate," he adds.

Lloyd-Jones concludes that, until such time as a designated expert body is put in charge of ensuring food control and safety standards are set to an appropriate level, and are fully adhered to, high risk members of the population (including newborns, the elderly and immune-compromised individuals like pregnant women and their unborn babies as well as people who have existing conditions such as HIV, diabetes, cancer and chronic liver or kidney disease) should continue to take additional precautions when purchasing and handling high-risk food products.

* The National Institute of Communicable Diseases (NICD)