

## Food for Thought

If I had to watch my own child (or anybody else's) suffer and possibly die from some disease, I would pray that it be anything but E. coli 0157 H:7 (0157). Anything, even Ebola, the disease that begins with a (killer) headache, and ends a few days later, with blood oozing from every orifice, including the eyes, ears, nipples and navel, would be preferable to watching a child endure the agony of 0157. For as horrible as Ebola is, and it is indeed excruciating and terrifying, at least with Ebola the agony is over within a week. 0157 wreaks its havoc sometimes for months on end, and serious damage to virtually all of a child's systems can, and usually does, remain with them for life, if they survive.

What follows is a passage from Gail A. Eisnitz's book "Slaughterhouse." This passage includes selections of testimony before Congress from a mother who has seen firsthand what can happen when a child is poisoned by 0157.

"My daughter Brianne lay in a hospital bed for one hundred sixty-seven days. For fifty-five of those days she was dying.

Our story begins with a tainted hamburger she ate in early January. Within a few days, Bri had a fever of 103.8° and abdominal cramps... That night we had to make a frantic visit to our pediatrician because Bri was bleeding from her rectum.

Later, I carried my daughter to the rest room to collect a urine sample. When I brought the cup up it was filled with blood that spilled onto my hand. When Brianne asked, "What is it, Mommy?" I told her it was the raspberry Popsicle she'd sucked on 6 hours earlier... The pain during her first eighty hours in the hospital was horrific. The intense abdominal cramping continued every ten to twelve minutes. Her intestines swelled to three times her normal size.

She fell into a deep coma that lasted forty days. All of her body organs swelled. Her breathing accelerated to a hundred breaths a minute so she was placed on a ventilator.

When the doctors told us Brianne had only an hour to live, we began a communion to celebrate her life. The doctors rushed her into emergency surgery to remove her colon, even though they still gave her little chance of survival. Miraculously, Brianne survived... After Brianne's second emergency surgery, surgeons left her open from sternum to her pubic area to allow her swollen organs room to expand and prevent them from ripping her skin. We were told Brianne had no chance of surviving. At one point her heart stopped beating, but the doctor revived her. Her heart was so swollen it was like a sponge. It bled from every pore.

The toxins shut down Bri's liver and pancreas. Several times her skin turned black for weeks. An insulin pump was started. She had a brain swell that neurologists could not treat with medication. EEG's revealed thousands of grand mal seizures, which had caused blood clots in her eyes.

Then the neurologists told us that Brianne was essentially brain dead. She had a five percent chance of surviving as a vegetable, a ninety-five percent chance of dying" (50 51).

Amazingly, this child did survive, but she will never again be the same healthy child she was before she ate that fateful hamburger.

She has heart disease, Diabetes, brain damage, seriously scarred lungs, and only one-third of her liver left. She was on dialysis for months, had pneumonia twice, had atrophied muscles throughout her body which required extensive physical and occupational therapy (52). In addition to the problems that Brianne experienced, children with 0157 have also had strokes (53, 54) and heart attacks (56).

The testimony concludes...

“Brianne still has a “micky button” attached to her stomach from the surface of her skin. A special formula is fed to her every night by a feeding pump attached to her “button” while she sleeps...HUS [ hemolytic uremic syndrome] caused the entire lining of her stomach to be burned. It is solid scar tissue. Because of this, she can only eat seven bites of food at each meal during the day.”

This is only one of the many wrenching statements given before congress at a symposium on food safety.

The HUS referred to above is now the leading cause of kidney failure in children and the elderly. It's cause is 0157 (Penner, Ph.D. par. # 3).

If this testimony frightens and shocks you, it should. E. coli 0157 H:7, a mutant virus whose one natural reservoir is the intestinal tract of cattle (Eisnitz 49) is now infecting people on a regular basis. Though it comes from cattle, once out of the cow and into the water supply or human, it can be spread from person to person at alarming rates.

A team of researchers from the National Institute of Infectious Diseases in Tokyo experimentally contaminated radish sprouts with 0157. They found that these bacteria got inside the radish sprouts, where they were able to survive, despite cleaning with mercury chloride, a strong disinfectant. This finding suggests that simple washing will not prevent outbreaks like the one that sickened 9,000 people in Japan in 1996 and 1997 (Altman par.#19).

This is not good news.

0157 is a relatively new mutation of a common and usually harmless strain of the bacteria called Escherichia coli found in mammals and the soil. According to Cargill Foods, the deadly 0157 infects at least 5% of the cattle in this country ( par. #11). Given that this information is at least two years old, and given that 0157 is a fairly new pathogen, it is fair to assume that infection rates in cattle have either already risen from this 5% figure, or will do so. Using the current US cattle herd number from the USDA of 98.5 million cattle and using the 5% figure puts the number of cattle currently infected with 0157 at 4.92 million.

This is not good news, especially when you consider the amount of contaminated feces being produced by these animals. Where does all this excrement go? Feedlots and stockyards

don't have sewer systems, and regardless of where the cattle are, it's a pretty safe bet that some of these killer bacteria are finding their way into our water supply.

But how does bacteria that thrive in the intestinal track of cattle find its way into hamburgers? The answer is simple, shocking, sickening, and shameful.

The answer is that the majority of food-borne illness, that is animal related, is caused by modern, state-of-the-art animal husbandry methods, and by modern, state-of-the-art slaughterhouses and processing plants. In these facilities the conditions are so filthy, and the industry so corrupt, and corrupt right to the top, that neither link in the chain could produce a wholesome product even if they wanted to.

Upton Sinclair's "The Jungle," which was first published in 1906, horrified the nation, but what was done then in slaughterhouses pales in comparison to what we do today to animals, from the time they are born till the time they are saran-wrapped. And what we do to them is beginning to make us sick.

Today's animals are raised in the most unnatural and inhumane ways imaginable. They are no longer even referred to as animals within the industry. They are "production units;" living, feeling beings who are treated like disposable machines. Their plight is horrifying and heart breaking. The system that tortures and enslaves them is ethically bankrupt, but rich in every other way; for it's money here that makes all the decisions. There is no common sense, no decency or compassion for the animals in their over-crowded cages and sheds, no regrets for the monster this industry has created and unleashed on a trusting public. But there is money. Lots of money, and because of the unnatural and inhumane conditions under which these animals are forced to live and die, there is something else as well. That something is disease, and lots of it. Americans need to wake up and find out exactly what they are consuming when they sit down to eat, because what they are eating is starting to bite back.

On modern monster-farms animals are routinely given antibiotics and hormones and treated with strong pesticides that end up in their flesh. On the feedlots, animals are fed, among other things, sawdust, cement-coated feed, and even their own waste. These money-saving innovations are compliments of the USDA.

At slaughterhouses and processing plants, animals are prodded, shocked, beaten, dragged and kicked along their way, healthy or not, to their final destination, the assembly line.

But it's not an assembly line, for nothing is assembled here. It's a disassembly line, and it moves so fast that animals are often disassembled while still alive, and screaming bloody murder.

"A lot of times the skinner finds out an animal is still conscious when he slices it's head and it starts kicking wildly. If that happens, or if a cow is already kicking when it arrives at their station, the skinners shove a knife into the back of its head to cut the spinal cord." This practice paralyzes the cow from the neck down but doesn't deaden the pain of head skinning or render the animal unconscious; it simply allows workers to skin or dismember the animal without getting

kicked (Eisnitz 29). With the whirl and roaring of machinery and blades, the suffering of the animals finally ends, and the suffering for consumers is about to begin.

Here at the slaughterhouse is where bellies infected with deadly agents are sliced open, to spill and splatter onto the slimy, filthy floor, and onto the knife-wielding workers who know what “a Hell of a job” really means.

Conditions inside today’s modern slaughterhouses and processing plants are a crime. With just under thirty-six injuries or illnesses per one hundred workers, a meat packer has the most dangerous job in the country (Eisnitz 271). Workers here face not only danger, but also the harshest and filthiest conditions and restrictions imaginable.

“One time, a woman complaining of headaches wasn’t allowed to leave the line. She passed out and died. Maybe she died right there on the line, or maybe she hit her head when she fell. I don’t know. All I know is that there was blood coming out of her eyes and ears. It was the worst thing I ever saw. Sometimes I still cry when I think about it.”

Beef plant worker:

“No matter how many hours we work... we have only two seven-minute breaks...I usually have to go the bathroom but, the bathrooms are always occupied. Breaks are the only time we are allowed to go to the bathroom. Workers sometimes go...on themselves—they have no other choice...If workers are feeling sick, they are not allowed to leave the line. Then, they get sick on the line and vomit on the floor. For pregnant workers, this problem is especially bad, but management makes no exceptions for them” (Poultry plant worker)(Eisnitz 270 271). These statements are telling, but is anyone listening?

Management escapes complying with state and federal regulations, because workers know better than to report these or any other violations. The other thing they know not to do is to stop the line, for any reason, be it sick person or contaminated meat. Line speed is always top priority; the faster the line, the fatter the profits.

Is it any wonder then, given the treatment of the animals, the routine breaking of laws, and the filth on the floors, that the meat Americans eat, including baby food, is too often contaminated? “I personally have seen rotten meat—you can tell by the odor. This rotten meat is mixed with fresh meat and sold for baby food. We are asked to mix it with the fresh food, and this is the way it is sold. You can see the worms inside the meat” (Eisnitz 175).

But let’s leave the wormy baby food behind and get back to how E. coli 0157 gets from the intestine of an infected cow into the burger of your child’s “happy meal.”

Theoretically, the cattle are supposed to be stunned before they are shackled, hoisted, and stuck. But stunning takes time, and time is money. To maximize profits, this critical step is frequently bypassed, or intentionally done improperly to keep the line moving at breakneck speeds. This practice is illegal, immoral, and poses a threat to the workers who are at great personal risk when working on a fully conscious cow.

Because the line is moving so fast, when the cow is eviscerated the intestine is sometimes sliced open and contaminated feces comes in contact with the carcass.

What follows is a quote from Mary Heersink, founder of STOP (Safe Tables Our Priority), whose child nearly died from 0157. “The USDA dropped the most basic principle learned at the dawn of mankind. Humans learned early on, probably the hard way, to keep manure off meat.

But here, at the end of the second millennium, at the very moment that a new, mutant strain of E. coli appears on the scene, at the very moment that the NAS is screaming for microbial testing and alarms are being sounded by the CDC, the USDA decides that the time has come to establish levels for allowable fecal contamination on meat. While epidemiologists measured that one speck of feces can contain millions of microbes of E. coli 0157, and that a mere one to ten microbes can kill a child, USDA bureaucrats were counting how many visible specks and smears of cow feces they would overlook on each animal” (Eisnitz 180 181).

One hamburger can contain tissue from as many as one hundred different animals. One infected animal can cross-contaminate sixteen tons of beef (Eisnitz 159).

See how easy it is? Any questions? Want another Happy Meal?

The Federal Meat Inspection Act of 1906 was enacted after Upton Sinclair’s “The Jungle” so shocked the nation that meat sales fell more than fifty percent (Eisnitz 21). This was the first failed attempt to “clean up” the slaughtering business. It failed because murdering animals is a messy, dirty business. It failed because inspections were, from the start, cursory and random. Only carcasses with visible defects were condemned. No microbial testing was done, so infected meat at times got by the inspectors and sickened consumers.

Since then, there have been several innovations, all approved by the USDA, of course, to provide a cheap and steady supply of “wholesome” meat for Americans to eat. First it was technology that allowed more animals to be processed faster. Safety suffered, but it was a small price to pay. Because the new machinery in poultry plants was routinely ripping open the birds intestines and contaminating the carcasses with feces, a problem which required condemning the birds, the USDA agreed in 1978 to reclassify feces from a contaminant to a “cosmetic blemish” and let it pass inspection with a simple rinse.

The 1980’s brought Reagan’s deregulation policies, which essentially took all power the inspectors previously had away. This was called “Streamlining.” Isn’t that a pretty word? Unfortunately, the consequences of this pretty word were pretty ugly. Inspectors were allowed to sample ten birds per fifteen thousand slaughtered. That’s less than one-tenth of one percent (Eisnitz 170 171). This innovation was not good news for food safety. The result of “streamlining” in the poultry industry today is contamination rates of up to 90% for both leukosis (chicken cancer) and salmonellosis in chickens (Robbins 67, 303).

Rates of infection for Campylobacter can be as high as 100%(Eisnitz 177). Campylobacter is the most common cause of diarrhea in the United States, and can cause a

paralysis that begins in the legs and spreads to the chest and neck, called Guillian-Barre syndrome, requiring intensive care. Though this result is fairly rare, (one in 1,000 reported cases of campylobacter infection) as many as 40% of all Guillian-Barre cases are attributed to campylobacter. This nasty little bug can also cause Arthritis. The most common means of infection is by handling raw poultry (one drop of juice is enough) or by eating it undercooked. Campylobacter can easily infect salads and vegetables too, by sharing utensils, knives or cutting boards with under or uncooked poultry (CDC).

Soon after streamlining was determined to be such a success in the poultry industry it was applied to all other meat industries as well.

This was not good news for food safety, but diseases, always eager for someone to host their parties, loved it. They came from everywhere to celebrate.

Recently, there has been some hysteria over a nationwide out break of *Listeria monocytogenes*. There have been many recalls involving this potentially fatal pathogen that is found mainly in ready-to-eat meat and poultry products such as hot dogs, lunchmeats, roast beef, cooked beef, cooked corned beef, sausage, cooked poultry, beef jerky, salads and spreads, and soft cheeses. Pregnant women are at particular risk for miscarriages and stillbirths when exposed to these bacteria. Also at extreme risk is anyone with a weak or compromised immune system, such as newborns, young children, the elderly, and HIV or cancer patients. This infection sometimes causes meningitis, and high-risk groups are currently being warned against eating any ready-to-eat foods unless they carefully cook them first and scrub like a surgeon after touching the product. This, from the Food Safety and Inspection Service, I found to be particularly unappetizing. When they specify how, and for how long, to wash your hands after you've touched the stuff, you know that maybe you shouldn't bother. I wonder how many mothers and day care workers are feeding toddlers cold hotdogs, and taking a bite themselves, some of them pregnant, even as I write this...

Yes, thank you, Streamlined Safety Inspection—you've opened so many doors for us.

The most recent addition to the long line of programs with the stated purpose of improving food safety is Bill Clinton's illegitimate brain-child, better known as HACCP, which stands for Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points. What it means is nothing. What it does, in essence, is give the meat industry the full control they've always wanted over policing themselves. It fills in the few gaps that remained when Streamline Inspection took over. It gives all the say to the greedy, but powerful few, who just don't care about anything but profits.

What all of these "innovations" has in common is that each is the result of a money-motivated power play, dirty deals, and corruption in high places. Each is also a giant step backward for food safety. Each is a descending rung on a ladder of deregulation, specifically designed to speed things up, loosen up restrictions, and change the definitions of what's safe for people, who nobody seems to care about, to eat.

How they differ is mainly in who has authority over the decisions controlling what meat reaches the public or didn't. At first, the government inspectors had total control. They were the

“highest power”—what they said, went, or more precisely, didn’t. Their words of condemnation could, and did, cost producers sometimes substantial amounts in lost revenue.

Consolidation was transforming agribusiness, both on the farm, and in the modern new processing plants that were increasingly slaughtering more and more of the animals nationwide. A growing monopoly. 80% of the cows slaughtered in 1987 were killed by just four firms. In hogs, the trend is the same. The eight largest firms slaughtered 73% of all hogs in 1996 (USDA Pg. 7).

On the farm, the pressure to either keep up with modern methods or get out of business was being felt. That pressure was translated to extreme cruelty to the animals unfortunate enough to be born a “food” animal. Though they had committed no crime, they were living life-sentences in crowded, filthy cages, crates, and sheds. Many were never to see the light of day or feel the grass beneath their feet until the time came to load the trucks that would take them to an even darker and more evil place. Family farmers who either couldn’t abide by, or keep up with, this brave new vision were swallowed by it; they were victimized just as the animals were.

Is it any wonder that these mutant new and dangerous strains of diseases originated, given the conditions the animals were living (and dying) under?

Increasingly, inspectors were becoming the problem, rather than the solution, in the eyes of the industry. It made perfect sense that a way would have to be found to either silence them or get rid of them altogether.

The rest is the history of deregulation; each step along the way displayed a thinly disguised contempt for both the people who put themselves at extreme risk to produce these poison products, and for the people who will unwittingly consume them.

What HACCP, the final solution, is supposed to be saying to the public “Don’t worry folks—we’re going to catch that nasty bacteria before you do. We’ll even throw in a little of the microbial testing you’ve been begging us for years for, just to show we really care.

What they don’t say is really more telling, for what they don’t tell us is this: first, the microbial testing will only test a tiny fraction of meat and poultry. Second, it will not be testing with a view to condemning contaminated meat—no. It will be testing to determine that contaminants are within acceptable levels. And who will decide just what level of contamination is acceptable?

The industry itself, of course.

This is not good news for meat-eaters.

The Whistleblower Protection Act of 1989 is meant to protect government and corporate employees from retribution. It’s designed to make it easier to report corruption, illegal acts, or improper behavior. The Government Accountability Project is a legal advocacy group that defends whistleblowers. They keep files. Some of these files tell a terrible truth about what goes

on in slaughterhouses and packing plants. I offer some examples from Gail A. Eisnitz's book "Slaughterhouse": red meat animals and poultry that were dead on arrival were hidden from inspectors and hung up to be butchered... Severed heads from cancer eye (a carcinoma that affects whitefaced cows which starts around the eye and eats huge craters out of a cow's face) were switched to smaller bodies before inspection so less meat would be condemned... In one facility inspectors retained six tons of pork with rust (bound for a school lunch program), 14,000 pounds of chicken with metal in it, 5,000 pounds of rancid chicken necks, and 721 pounds of green chicken that made employees gag from the smell.

Rancid meat had been smoked to cover foul odor, or marinated and breaded to disguise slime and smell... Chickens and hams were soaked in chlorine baths to remove slime and odor and red dye was added to beef to make it appear fresh... Meat was packed in boxes along with fist-sized clumps of fecal matter. Pieces of lungs, rectums, and dead insects had been found as well...

Maggots and other larvae were breeding in transport tubs and boxes, on the floor, in processing equipment and packaging. Workers continued to urinate in the carcass cooler, and urinate on the floor while working on the line... Facilities repeatedly failed to send home sick employees, resulting in employees sneezing on product, sneezing into their hands and wiping them off on passing carcasses, and coughing up phlegm onto product... Plant personnel shoveled food directly off the floor into edible sausage bins.

Plant managers repeatedly fought to allow "some contamination," such as feces, grease, hydraulic oil, maggots, metal floor residue and rancid meat... Plant managers made such comments as, "Who cares? This product is going to New York" (286 287).

Who cares, indeed? Certainly not the USDA, the agency appointed to care. For in 1997 the USDA made its intentions clear and announced that it planned to improve the "use of its resources" by taking the vast majority of inspectors off the production line. The USDA called for the "elimination of unnecessary obstacles to innovation," (inspectors) in favor of "industry monitoring." Meat and poultry inspectors would be "redeployed" to reviewing paperwork and monitoring the transport and distribution of products after they left the plant (Eisnitz 288).

Oh, well... the inspection process has been a dirty joke for years anyway, and who needs it, now that we've finally got our microbial testing? Who, indeed?

What to do, what to do? This evil is so huge, so deeply entrenched, so rich, so powerful. How can we ever hope to right the wrongs that have been committed against the animals, who always pay the highest price for the flavor of their flesh, the family farmers, who lost their livelihood, their land, and finally their hope, and the workers, mostly migrants now, who are viewed as disposable by the corrupt corporations who employ them?

The corruption goes from the slimy, filthy floors of the factory farms, to the blood-and-gut-soaked floors of the slaughterhouses, through the polished and glistening floors of congress right up to the spotless floors of the White House. What will we do, what can we do, that will make any difference?

Unfortunately, the single most powerful thing a person can do to protect themselves and their family is also the single thing that most of us are unwilling to do: boycott these products of poison and pain. Boycott the companies who promote them as “pure” and “wholesome” when they know that they are not. Demand accountability and safety and don’t take a bite of these products until you get it. Educate yourself about what’s really going on, for only with the knowledge of what they don’t want you to know can you make intelligent decisions regarding your options.

Support campaign finance reform, for as long as members of congress continue to accept mass amounts of money from the meat and poultry processing interests, and from the meat and poultry producers, the public doesn’t stand a chance of ever cleaning up the corruption in the system.

There are those who say that irradiation is the answer (Osterholm 33). After reviewing material from USDA’s Food Safety and Inspection Service, which is supposed to allay the public’s fears, I disagree. First, consider the source: USDA. Second, considering the language used throughout this document, such as “no significant impact,” “at or below levels allowed,” “negligible risk,” and the like, I am suspicious. That, and the very long list of accidents associated with the transport and use of radioactive material makes me tend to not support the use of radiation. This is a moot point, however, because the USDA is currently allowing much of our food, including all meat and poultry products, to be irradiated. The main threat appears to be to the environment and workers, but the USDA is satisfied that it’s not really that dangerous. Whew! What a relief!

For those of us unwilling to give up their carnivorous ways, in spite of all the evidence of the benefits of doing so, the only line of defense left is to avoid the most obvious places and products outside the home that may harbor the worst hazards. These are, of course, fast food restaurants, and the hamburgers and chicken served there.

In the home, scrupulous attention to handling practices and cleanliness is essential. The lives of those you love are what is at stake here, so be obsessive and relentless. Treat the meat you want to eat as if it’s poison. It probably is contaminated with at the very least, dirt and bad vibes, even if you’re lucky enough to get something that isn’t crawling with killer microbes.

Wash your hands like you’re preparing for brain surgery and you’re the surgeon before you touch it. Wear gloves if you have any cuts on your fingers or hands. NEVER, EVER use the same knives or cutting boards on food that will not be cooked that you used on food that will be. Never undercook your animal products.(You might want to cultivate a taste for Cajun cooking—blackened food and the hot spices may help to kill the killers.)

Don’t let food sit out for long. Wash your dishes within two hours of eating, and let them air dry rather than drying them with a towel (Morganthau 28 29). After handling raw meat, do the brain surgeon routine again, and make sure the rest of your family does the same.

Consider, at the very least, cutting down on animal-based products if you can't face giving up on them entirely. That way, you will be increasing your chances of avoiding the day when the statistics catch up to you.

In closing I would also ask that some thought be given to the spiritual aspects of consuming the flesh of animals who have suffered so much. What spiritual nutrition can there be in that?

In some European countries, people have demanded an end to the cruel practices of Factory Farming, and their governments have listened. In these countries, legislation has been passed to phase these systems out. Maybe, if enough people boycott, lobby and shout, we could follow their lead. I hope so, for all our sakes, but especially for the animals, who did nothing to deserve any of this.