

**E COLI 0157
(Paper by Eva Lewis, Consumer Panel Member November 1998)**

1 There has been lots of new publicity about the cooking of burgers due to the problem of E Coli. Many warnings have now gone out to the consumer to cook all burgers so that there are no pink bits in the middle. I noticed that in the enclosed new cutting it states that “last night one of the largest burger chains said its waiters would only warn customers if the Government made it a legal requirement”.

2 In Lanarkshire 21 people died after contracting E Coli 0157. *A copy of the Fatal Accident Inquiry into the incident is enclosed for Panel Members and Consumer Representatives.

3 An edition of a “World in Action” programme, shown on 24 August 1998, about E Coli featured a “fly on the wall” report on the way butchers handle their meat.

4 The programme reported that:

- No systems were in place when a contaminated animal arrives in the slaughterhouse and that by the time E Coli is detected it is already in the food chain.
- 10% of the samples that were bought into the butchers shop in Bolton contained another type of E Coli in their raw meat.
- E Coli (not type 0157) was found in one of the samples of meat.
- Burgers bought and cooked to the manufacturer’s instructions of 8 minutes were still not cooked enough even after 18 minutes. If they had contained E Coli they would had caused food poisoning.
- One of the relatives of the 21 people who died felt that E Coli was being swept under the carpet.

5 The programme also filmed butchers shops being checked and discussions about why cooked meat was too close too raw meat. Butchers premises were also secretly filmed and showed that the quality of hygiene was not up to standard. It also showed butchers handling raw meat and then cooked meat without washing their hands in between. The film was then shown to a person from the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health.

6 Whilst it is not known how typical the World in Action programme was, a few million people must have seen it. The report was very sensational and was shown at peak time. It is important to inform consumers without scaring them. Consumers need to know how true the report was. It is also important to assure consumers that butchers are being inspected more often. It will be interesting to look at the E Coli detection facilities at the slaughterhouse being visited during the out-of-town meeting. Other questions to be discussed at the meeting are:

- Could butcher shops be monitored more closely?

Consumer Panel Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) CP(98)35/1

- Restaurants need to be more concerned with the safety of burgers.
- Could the consumer be informed and not frightened about E Coli?
- McDonalds have publicly stated that they cook their burgers thoroughly and do not give a choice as to how you would like it cooked.

Prepared by:

Eva Lewis
November 1998

Distributed by:

MAFF Consumer Panel Secretariat
Room 306c, Ergon House c/o Nobel House
17 Smith Square
London SW1P 3JR
Tel: 0171 238 5779
Fax: 0171 238 6330

* Footnote

Copies of the Determination into E Coli 0157 Fatal Accident Inquiry can be purchased from the sheriff Clerks Office, 4 Beckford Street, Hamilton, South Lanarkshire. (tel: 01698 282957) at a cost of £31.00.