

# Food, glorious food

As shops everywhere urge us to pile our baskets high with festive food, **Bridget Hutter** and **Clive Jones** remind us that some may suffer from more than indigestion before the holiday season is out. Researcher Keith Stafford asked them if we should be worried.

## What interested you in the food business?

Food safety and hygiene are really important, because mistakes can cause havoc in the industry, wreck a company and seriously damage people's health. Right now, techniques to regulate and manage risk are changing in many industries and there is little solid research into what worries managers, and who influences them, as they try to ensure things don't go wrong. We knew regulations were a major constraint but wanted to see what other influences were in play, such as consumer complaints, the media, lawyers and pressure groups. It's not just red tape that matters.

## How did you conduct your study?

First we talked to experts, and then we asked food business managers what they understood about food safety and hygiene risks, what their sources of information were and what controls they used to prevent problems. Between 2002 and 2006 we talked to just over 200 managers in about 30 companies across England and Scotland, from really small firms through medium sized caterers



to large food retailers. We now have an important piece of work on how companies handle risk, and on who and what matters to them.

## What did you uncover?

Well, frankly, a lot of confusion. Clearly there is no broad agreement about the state of food safety and hygiene in the UK today. Some experts report high standards overall but others think it varies from good to very poor. They all suspected the danger was higher in small businesses, but you don't have to look far back into history to see large companies can stumble. Only this summer Cadbury recalled products as a precautionary measure in the UK and Ireland, worried they might contain minute traces of salmonella. The research also encountered confusion, especially in stores and restaurants. Many of those we talked to were at a loss about just what today's rules are and who polices what – Food Standards Agency officials, Environmental Health Officers or Trading Standards staff?

## So, how vulnerable are we?

Recalls cost companies a fortune – both in financial terms and in damage to their name. Even the best are vulnerable. During our early research we were told not to expect problems at large supermarket chains; just one month later, the Food Standards Agency warned consumers about contamination from a dye in food involving hundreds of products on the shelves of thousands of UK shops. All sectors in the food industry are really quite vulnerable.

## Are food companies complacent?

No, we don't think so. What amazed us was the sheer complexity of running a food retail, catering or hospitality business. It doesn't look complex to you or me when we buy pizza at a supermarket counter or restaurant, but when you explore from the inside you realise that managers sit in a web of regulation and scrutiny. They have to think about health and safety compliance, consumers, financial reports, taxation, staff management and so on. If

you look at the regulations these people have to comply with, it's a massive list and small companies have little support.

## Don't the regulators offer help?

They do, and Environmental Health Officers visit most businesses each year, but virtually none of the small catering businesses we talked to had ever asked them for advice outside those annual checks, even though these are the officials that food company managers worry about most. Some managers didn't even know that Environmental Health staff are employed by local councils. We thought this all rather strange because it's clear the officers are always ready to help the food industry. Small companies seem to see their official visits as an important way to learn, but lack the confidence to ask for advice, whereas larger businesses do. The good news is that we did find that managers value training a lot and it really does seem to have a significant impact.

## What role does the consumer play in all this?

The strength of consumer power was our biggest surprise. The experts we talked to first hardly mentioned customers, so it was a revelation when we found that managers regard customers as one of the strongest watchdogs, of only slightly less concern than the Environmental Health checks. Managers think that consumers are far more interested in food safety than prices or labelling and that they don't worry nearly as much about genetic modification or organic growing. On the whole, consumers regard UK standards as very high but still worry a lot about potential food poisoning at restaurants.

## Who else influences food managers?

Some stores set their own standards and managers then watch trade organisations, commercial consultants, the insurance industry, lawyers, pressure groups, quality assurance schemes and so on. They know laws alone don't dictate their actions. Many

policy makers don't see that. Rule makers might think regulations matter most but we found many other constraints, and policy makers should realise just how strong these other constraints are.

## Do media stories have a major influence?

Although the media is often considered an influential opinion-former, we found its influence here was well below that of consumers and of government rules, although all businesses are upset when the food industry or a product comes under the media spotlight. We also found that lawyers, pressure groups and insurance companies don't carry much weight, and, although experts think insurance companies' power is growing because they underwrite liability, it really hasn't become enough of a factor to overtake the power of legislation.

## Do you have any advice?

Yes. Managers need to watch those incredibly simple things like making sure people serving food wash their hands. In all businesses today, not just selling food, people are under pressure at work. They cut corners. You see them preparing food, serving it and then taking money to the till. Next they turn to a waiting customer without washing their hands. It's inevitable. In the food industry you have to be careful day after day.

## How will your research help the industry?

We think it will help companies appreciate how to do things better and will show policy makers that things other than rules do matter. There are some big messages from this research. Everyone knows state regulation and credible enforcement shape the way companies behave, but companies in the food industry – and probably other companies too – need to be aware of other major influences that demand they manage their activities well so as to avoid any risk to the public.



## What comes next?

We want to take this type of research into other industries and, depending on funding, across Europe, the USA and countries such as China to compare and contrast how different people think about food safety. We also hope to look at perceptions of danger and risk management in occupational health and safety and the financial markets. Are they different? Do the same patterns emerge in different types of business and with different types of employees?

## Finally, Clive, I understand you had food poisoning twice during this research. How are you now?

Fine thanks. It was very painful, I was in bed for three days with one bout. It was ironic to be hit just when I was doing this research. But people have died from food poisoning and I learned the hard way that it really is important for everyone in the food trade to be vigilant. ■



### Bridget M Hutter

is ESRC Professor of Risk Regulation and director of the ESRC Centre for Analysis of Risk and Regulation (CARR) at LSE.



### Clive J Jones

is a research project manager in the Centre.



CARR is one of the world's few cross-disciplinary research units looking at how risk management and regulations affect organisations. It was launched in October 2000 and this year secured a second funding term from the Economic and Social Research Council.

The Michael Peacock Charitable Foundation funded this food safety and regulation project. Read the full discussion paper *Business Risk Management Practices: the influence of state regulatory agencies and non-state sources* at [www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CARR](http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CARR)