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Press statement by the Minister for Health: Take-away food survey

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58/74

2423

PRESS STATEMENT BY THE MINISTER FOR HEALTH, DR D.N. EVERINGHAM.

TAKE-AWAY FOOD SURVEY

The Minister for Health, Dr D.N. Everingham, said today that a trial run of a nation-wide microbiological survey of take-away foods had been successfully completed and the survey proper would begin later this month.

The survey is the latest in the extensive food microbiological work carried out by the Australian Department of Health since 1966, which has already led to the establishment of microbiological standards for a range of foods including such items as ice cream, cream, yogurt, cheese, meat and meat products, oysters and other shell fish and pre-cooked frozen prawns.

Dr Everingham said that the latest microbiological survey would provide information on a particular range of "convenient foods" for which adequate data are not available at present, so that standards could be devised for these, also.

He pointed out that it was not the presence or absence of organisms that was important, but the type, and particularly the numbers that were present that were of significance to human health.

"After all, we are surrounded by micro-organisms in our environment and some of these are necessary for our continued well being", he said.

Dr Everingham said the trial run for this particular survey had been conducted over the past three months following a recommendation by the Food Standards Committee of the National Health and Medical Research Council.

The trial was held in Perth, Sydney and Brisbane to verify the sampling methods to be used and to establish suitable computer methods to process the results from the survey proper.

In the main survey, a total of five hundred samples of each of 23 items of food will be taken in Sydney, Perth and Brisbane. Food samples will include rotisseried chickens, deep-fried chickens, take-away stews, imitation cream, fish dishes, take-away salads, meat pies, chinese-type food rolls, hamburgers, infant foods, corned beef, ham and devon-type sausage.

These foods will be examined for salmonella organisms and a number of other micro-organisms known to be potential causes of food poisoning. Some of the other micro-organisms will include those which may be indicative of poor food handling practices.

The Food Standards Committee will then prepare a microbiological standard for take-away foods which will guide the States and Territories on legislation to protect take-away food customers from food poisoning.

Dr Everingham pointed out that State health authorities were continuing to carry out microbiological testing of foods and to condemn any food found to be unsatisfactory. Any new guidelines would assist the States and strengthen their powers under existing legislation.

Dr Everingham said that the Food Standards Committee of the N.H.&M.R.C. had for over 20 years advised the Council on all aspects of food legislation, including the standards necessary for the safe manufacture, labelling, packaging, storage, advertising and sale of food for human consumption.

Over 60 specific food standards had already been established. Among those currently being considered were standards for baby foods, milk and beer.

Dr Everingham said the School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine and the State Health Laboratories of New South Wales, Western Australia and Queensland would assist with the latest survey, under the overall direction of the Australian Department of Health and with the approval of the N.H.&M.R.C.

CANBERRA, July 6, 1974.