



Healthy products for healthy consumers

by Isabel Basson

"Retailers, processors and producers have over the years come to know the faces of their local health inspector who came to visit their shop, plant or milking parlour on a regular basis. In recent years, however, the perception was there that things might be changing for the worst"

M&J Retail spoke to Dries Pretorius, recently appointed director: food control at the National Health Department about the current situation in the directorate and the role of environmental health in the retail and processing environment.



Dries Pretorius

Pretorius was appointed as director: food control in March 2006 and his focus at the moment is on food safety, the adulteration of food, as well as the correct labelling of food, aimed at protecting the consumer against the health risks associated with unsafe food and misleading statements. According to Pretorius, milk and dairy products are important sources of nutrition and therefore the proper monitoring from an environmental health point of view is critical due to the potential risk of disease that can originate from it.

The Directorate Food Control believes in working closely with the various sectors of the food industry. "We see it as a shared responsibility, and therefore a partnership between government, industry and the consumer," says Pretorius. According to him, this is clearly illustrated by the excellent co-operation between the directorate and the dairy industry through organisations such as the Dairy Standard Agency (DSA). DSA has been involved in various provincial workshops to strengthen the capacity of environmental health practitioners (EHP's), previously known as health inspectors.

The Health Department is of the opinion that the assurance of safe milk and dairy products from a hygiene and food safety point of view, must be addressed in an integrated manner along the food supply chain, through the so-called farm-to-fork approach. Even the agricultural inputs and health status of the milking herd has an influence on the safety status of the milk.

Pretorius wants to build on the outstanding achievements of his predecessor, Dr Theo van der Venter, who retired in 2005. He also wants to continue South Africa's involvement in international standard organisations, for example the FAO/WHO *Codex Alimentarius* Commission, of which the directorate is the national contact. He furthermore wants to continue supporting the provincial and municipal health authorities to strengthen their capacities with regard to food legislation, monitoring and law enforcement. Pretorius also seeks to find solutions for the special challenges related to food safety and hygiene posed by the first and second economy of South Africa. In the second economy they generally refer to so-called street foods sold within the informal sector.

HACCP FOOD & BEVERAGE QUALITY

pH together with temperature rank as the most important indicators of food quality and safety. pH of raw material such as milk and meat is measured to ensure that quality standards are met. pH is also monitored at different stages of food processing and production, to guarantee safety, improve production and enhance quality.

pH also determines the shelf life of foodstuffs, for example, by bringing the pH value below 4,5 growth and multiplication of pathogens are inhibited.

The monitoring of temperature also helps keep growth of pathogens and microorganisms under control. During the preparation of fruit juices, temperature of the fruit pulp is monitored near boiling point and when the mash is pasteurised.

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Communication

Pretorius regards communication about food safety as a fundamental part of any food control programme and wherever possible the directorate makes information available to farmers, processors, retailers and consumers on a continual basis. The directorate's webpage serves as a source of such information, containing legislation, guidelines, health education material, etc. Visit www.doh.gov.za/department/dir_foodcontrf.html

The Directorate: Food Control functions at the national level of government, and is therefore not directly responsible for with the executive functions of food control, such as policing, law enforcement and monitoring. Their responsibilities include:

- The development and publication of health requirements and standards for foodstuffs and the handling thereof, as set out in the regulations included in the Foodstuffs, Cleaning Agents and Disinfectants Act (Act 54 of 1972), as well as other guidelines and policy documents
- Supporting the monitoring and control of foodstuffs and food handling premises related to these standards
- Making information about food safety available through information, education and communication activities generally referred to as IEC.

The legislation in the health sector mainly consists of a wide variety of regulations announced by the Minister of Health in terms of Act 54. These regulations cover aspects such as:

- Hygienic standards for food handling premises, including milking parlours, processing plants and shops
- Product standards aimed at microbiological and chemical safety of foodstuffs
- Food labelling and advertisements
- Food additives such as preservatives and colorants.

The functions related to the enforcement of the Act, and especially the various regulations, are the responsibility of the nine provincial and 53 municipal health authorities. Members of the dairy industry must take note that any liaison regarding the application of the legislation concerned, should be directly with the mentioned health authorities' environmental health services.

The nine provinces also render port health services that includes the control of imported foodstuffs under the Act, while the municipalities are responsible for the certification and hygienic control of milking parlours, processing facilities, transport of milk and dairy products, as well as the handling of milk at retail level.

EHP's

The role of the EHP's can further be described as rendering a comprehensive environmental health service with regard to the control of all those factors in the living, work and recreational environment of people and communities that could have a negative effect on health, to minimise or eliminate potential risks. The EHP's in South Africa require registration with the South African Professions Council under their specific professional board for EHP's. Mentioned registration can only take place if the individual completed the recommended three year national diploma or a four year BTech degree for environmental health that included subjects on food hygiene and food safety.

According to Pretorius, the Health Department depends on all members of the dairy industry to ensure the safety of their products. Food safety is the responsibility of the entire dairy sector, not that of the department.

Curriculum Vitae

Pretorius has been with the Health Department for the past 33 years. He started working for the Health Department in 1973 as a student health inspector. He represented the Department of Health in Nelspruit where he did malaria control. In Bloemfontein he was, among others, involved with the then newly published regulations for milking parlours put in place in the 1980's. These regulations required certificates of acceptability for milking parlours.

In 1992 he started working in the Health Department head office in Pretoria, and in 1997 moved to the directorate food control. He also completed his further education at the Universities of Pretoria and Free State, where he completed post-graduate degrees in social sciences and public management.

Pretorius was appointed as director: food control in March 2006. **M&JR**