Reporting of Foodborne Illness by U.S. Consumers & Healthcare Professionals

Catherine Strohbehn, PhD, RD, CP-FS
Extension Specialist & Professor

Kristen Obbink, DVM, MPH
IA Food Protection Rapid Response Team Coordinator
Presentation based on the following publication:

**Reporting of Foodborne Illness by U.S. Consumers and Healthcare Professionals**

Susan Arendt, Lakshman Rajagopal, Catherine Strohbehn, Nathan Stokes, Janell Meyer, Steven Mandernach

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BACKGROUND

- 1,527 foodborne disease outbreaks reported by CDC (2009-10)
- Estimated 48 million foodborne illnesses contracted annually in the U.S. (Scallan et al. 2011)
- 57% of Americans indicate concern about food safety (NPR 2011)
- Despite availability of online resources, 62% of patients trust physicians for all health-related information (Hesse et al. 2004)
- Healthcare providers report being uncomfortable with their knowledge of foodborne illness, its treatment and its diagnosis (MacDonald et al. 2007)
PURPOSE

• Identify barriers to the under-reporting of foodborne illness by consumers and healthcare professionals
• Propose solutions to overcome identified barriers
METHODOLOGY: Qualitative Approach

Focus Groups

- Recruitment
  - Phase I: 3 groups in 3 Iowa cities - **35 consumers**
  - Phase II: 4 groups in 4 Iowa cities - **16 health care professionals**
  - Multiple methods: flyers at work sites, public areas, and networks of ISU Extension and Outreach staff

- Facilitation
  - Prior to focus group: Short assessment about attitudes toward food safety and demographic information gathered
  - Pseudonyms selected
  - Snacks provided
  - Expedited by experienced moderator and assistant moderator
  - Audio recorded and transcribed
Consumers questioned about:

- Have you ever suffered from food poisoning?
- How did you know your illness was from food and not something else?
- What did you do?
- Did you report it? If so, to whom?
- What could make it easier to report?
- How hard do you think it is to collect a usable stool sample?
Healthcare Professionals questioned about:

- Levels of concern from patients/clients about safety of our food?
- Where do you believe patients/clients have the greatest risk of acquiring a foodborne illness?
- What are the barriers to diagnosing a foodborne illness?
- Experiences with patients who had foodborne illnesses
- Reasons to suspect a foodborne illness
RESULTS:
Consumer participants’ profile (n=35)

- Mostly female (74.3%)
- Age groups diverse – approximately half were 50 years or older (48.6%)
- Majority completed some level of higher education (Associate degree, Bachelor degree or Graduate degree - 51.4%)
- Largest percentage had annual income less than $25,000 (37.1%)
- Ethnicity mainly Caucasian (85.7%)
- Healthcare plan paid by employer (39.0%)
Consumers’ Attitudes:

• Believed they did not have a food allergy (80.0%)
• Past 3 months, ill from something you ate? (34.3% yes)
• Ever sick from something you ate as adult? (91.4% yes)
• Safety of food purchased to prepare at home: 40.0% concerned or very concerned
• Safety of food prepared away from home: 57.1% concerned or very concerned
• Best approach to reduce risk of foodborne illness (FBI)?
  • Better quality control (77.1%)
  • Better consumer education (62.9%)
  • More inspections/increased government oversight (62.8%)
Consumers’ Focus Group Responses:

- How did you know you were suffering from a foodborne illness?
  - Themes related to severity and duration of symptoms

- Did you report illness and to whom?
  - Mostly no, because:
    - Unsure of who to contact
    - Too ill to make contact
    - Uncertainty of cause or source of illness
    - Did not think reporting would matter
Consumers’ Focus Group Responses:

• What would be the best way to get information about how to report food poisoning?
  - Memorable telephone number (similar to 1-800-BETSOFF)
  - Internet
  - Restaurant postings/package materials

• What would make it easier to report an illness?
  - Education
  - Knowing someone cared
  - Knowing someone will be held accountable
Consumers’ Focus Group Responses:

- How hard would it be to collect a stool sample?
  - Difficult: messy, inconvenient process, embarrassing
  - Not difficult: previous experience

- Concerned about providing a stool sample?
  - Yes: new request, scary, inconvenient
  - No: previous experience, needed for diagnosis, can benefit me
Healthcare professionals’ profile (n=16)

- All female and all Caucasian
- Equally split amongst three age categories:
  - 26 – 34 years of age
  - 35 – 49 years of age
  - 50 – 64 years of age
- Majority worked in medical clinics (68.8%)
- Mostly full time employees (81.3%)
- Most listed profession of “other” (81.3%) with titles given of office nurse and medical assistant
Healthcare professionals’ questionnaire

- Concern about safety of food: 68.8% concerned/very concerned
- Perceptions of patients’ concern: 46.7% not at all/not very concerned
- Location for greatest risk of FBI? 68.8% said foodservice establishment
- Ever had a patient with confirmed FBI? 66.7% said No
- Frequency of patients with food related complaints?
  - 37.5% each said <1 time/month or 3-10 times/month
Barriers to diagnosing FBI as identified by healthcare professionals:

- Time between food ingestion and treatment (93.8%)
- Lack of patient knowledge (87.5%)
- Cost (50.0%)
- Unavailability of suspected food (50.0%)
- Lack of healthcare provider knowledge (43.8%)
Healthcare professionals’ preferred methods of receiving new information:

- Emails (75.0%)
- Newsletters (31.3%)
- Face to face (25.0%)
- Webinar (25.0%)
Healthcare Professionals’ Focus Group Themes:

- Experiences working with suspected food illness focused on treating symptoms
- Knew to suspect foodborne illness according to:
  - Severity and duration of symptoms
  - Personal experiences with FBI
  - Multiple people presenting
- Action steps if FBI suspected:
  - Make calls
  - Further questioning
  - Other diagnostic tests – blood and stool
Healthcare Professionals’ Focus Group Themes:

- Issues related to diagnosing foodborne illness:
  - Cost
  - Required tests
  - Patient knowledge/HCP knowledge
  - Unavailability of suspected food
  - Time lapse

- Reasons stool samples not taken:
  - Cost
  - Lack of HCP knowledge
  - Lack of patient knowledge/reluctance
  - Challenge to collect
  - Focus on treatment
  - Symptoms mild
Healthcare Professionals’ Focus Group Themes:

- Information/tools needed to help patients with suspected FBI:
  - Flyers for patients about prevention/treatment of foodborne illness (English and Spanish)
  - Public education
  - Healthcare professional in-services
  - Decision making tools (i.e. flow charts)
  - Easy stool sample collection methods
  - Web-based resources
CONCLUSIONS & IMPLICATIONS

• Barriers for reporting of FBI exist for both consumers & healthcare professionals

• Identified barriers would best be overcome through:
  - Targeted education
    - Consumers: stool sample collection resources, why it’s important to report, complaint response process and potential outcomes
    - Healthcare Professionals: importance of collecting a stool sample, algorithms/flow charts for evaluating potential foodborne illnesses, in-services
  - Improved access & information regarding FBI reporting process
    - Memorable phone number (similar to 1-800-BETSOFF)
    - Reporting information listed on restaurant postings/packaging materials
    - Centralized statewide reporting
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Thank you for your attention!

QUESTIONS?

Dr. Catherine Strohbehn  
Extension Specialist/Professor  
31 MacKay Hall, AESHM  
Department, ISU  
Ames, IA, 50011-1121  
(515) 294-3527  
cstrohbe@iastate.edu

Dr. Kristen Obbink  
IA Food/Feed RRT Coordinator  
Iowa Dept. of Public Health  
Lucas State Office Building  
321 E. 12th Street  
Des Moines, IA 50319  
(515) 281-6049  
Kristen.Obbink@idph.iowa.gov