

Outbreak of Foodborne Illnesses in Jaffna District

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Food safety, a worldwide public health issue, is a result of consumer concerns largely on health and on improving food quality. Foodborne illnesses are defined as diseases, either infectious or toxic in nature, caused by agents that enter the body through the ingestion of food or water (WHO: Fact sheet N°237). Such food and water contaminants are found in developed, developing and poor countries, including Sri Lanka. In year 2005, a total of 1.8 million people died from diarrheal diseases (WHO: Fact sheet N°237) of which a substantial proportion has been attributed to consumption of contaminated food and water.

In last two years, including 9 deaths, a total 5079 cases of clinically suspected food and waterborne illnesses in malnourished people were reported from Regional Directorate of health Services (RDHS) divisions and hospitals in Jaffna district (RDHS Jaffna, 2009). Those cases had been treated symptomatically either as inpatients or outpatients by respective medical doctors. It also has been noticed that gastroenteritis either by food poisoning due to contamination of food and water or foodborne pathogens, is a common condition in domestic animals (both pet and livestock) in the area concern.

The potential trend, if confirmed, may be attributed to possible rapid fecal contamination of wells since they are in close proximity to the lavatory pits. Such situation has not been observed in other parts of the country. Moreover, Jaffna peninsula is prone for seasonal floods, especially in the period of November, due to its unique geography. As a result, fecal contamination of drinking water sources would be important in inducing foodborne illnesses, in addition to unhygienic food handling. Further, the intensive agricultural practices involving very high inputs of artificial fertilizers may lead to potential accumulation of inorganic and heavy metals in water resources as well as in vegetation.

Currently, families who left from Jaffna due to civil unrest in the past are returning back and the peninsula is getting tourist attraction. It is the duty of health professionals to identify the public health problems and associated risk factors along with etiology and propose remedial action. Therefore it is suggested that a properly planned study involving all areas must be carried out considering geography and the unique culture in Jaffna. A detailed investigation on potential conditions in humans and animals in Jaffna would be much valuable for their physical, mental and social wellbeing in present and future.