

United States Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI)  
Senior Regional Food Safety Authority  
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**"Challenges and opportunities for Food Regulators  
in Coordinating Food Event Responses in the  
regional and international level"**



**Dr. Thouraya ANNABI ATTIA,**  
Deputy Director, Responsible For the Department of Sanitary Control,  
***Agence Nationale de Contrôle Sanitaire et Environnemental des Produits***  
**(ANCSEP)**  
**Ministry of Health, Tunisia**

# INTRODUCTION

- **ANCSEP** is a national agency born in the same time as European food authorities (as a consequence of food crises in the 90's); it runs under the aegis of the Ministry of Health.
- **Our agency has 3 departments:**
  - Food safety
  - Drug
  - Environment

# Our main mission

- Coordination between controllers from all departments
- Improve Capacities for controllers including labs
- Risk assessment
- **Why coordination?**
  - There are at least 4 main ministries involved in food control
  - more than one department in each ministry
  - Some of those departments have their own labs.
  - and numerous other departments as secondary contributors.
  - Each department carried out its own information system (including alert system)

# What about food born diseases in Tunisia?

TWO main sanitary systems to monitor diseases related to water and food (*in addition to other more specific systems like school health*):

- Mandatory notification of transmissible illness (*coordinated by health care directorate*) : not specific
- food surveillance plans (*coordinated by hygiene directorate*)

All of the sanitary departments are involved in a common system : Food born outbreak investigation and response network.

# Outbreaks statistics

According to the epidemiological bulletin:

- 69 outbreaks (epidemic sources) in 2003
- 72 outbreaks in 2004
- 90 outbreaks in 2005
- 81 outbreaks in 2006

Other sources of information : *the feed back about tourists (after they go home)*



some cases each year

# Characteristics of the outbreaks

- More than 80% are family cases.
- Few outbreaks were analytically investigated (*only 8/90 cases were investigated in 2005 and 11/81 in 2006*).
- But each year the food surveillance system carries out thousands of microbiological analysis (*47.771 in 2005 only for the health department*).

**ANCSEP is the focal point of INFOSAN,  
we have become a member of the  
INFOSAN advisory group since its first  
meeting.**

# Strategic Health Operations Center



# SOME SANITARY ALERTS RELATED TO FOOD

# “Cadbury” chocolate case : the event (1)

- In June 2006, Cadbury Schweppes Plc has recalled 7 different brands of chocolate products due to possible contamination with *Salmonella* Montevideo. All the batches recalled were made in UK and Ireland.
- The FSA and the FSAI assured that every thing was done for the consumer’s safety and that it was a relatively local alert. The British embassy in Tunisia sent us a special mailing to confirm that.
- In November 2006 we received an official claim via the Egyptian embassy in Tunisia (*the Cadbury representative for North Africa is located in Cairo*) , that Tunisian sanitary authorities had taken hold of a certain quantity of Cadbury chocolate in October 2006 and never returned it or gave any instruction about the seized batch.

# “Cadbury” chocolate case : the event (2)

- After investigation, we found out that a sanitary alert was held against all kinds of Cadbury chocolate in September 2006 and the low quantity of the named goods found, was seized to be analysed. The lab does not find salmonella and goods had to be returned.
- On the other hand we found out that only Turkish Cadbury chocolate was imported in Tunisia.

# “ Cadbury” chocolate case :

## the lesson learned

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- The setting up of the alert was unconsidered, its follow up was insufficient and the exchange of information at the local level was low or absent.
- The exchange of information at the regional level is “only administrative”.

# The melamine case :

## The event (1)

- In March 2007 there was a recall of more than 100 brands of pet foods across USA related to melamine contamination of the raw agricultural compounds of these foods (wheat gluten and rice protein imported from China)
- In May we received (as “technical contact” in Tunisia) a communication from FDA to ask us what actions we are taking to keep melamine and similar chemical contaminants out of our food supply

# The melamine case :

## The event (2)

- We investigated with our colleagues in the Department of Trade:
  - Wheat gluten is imported only from France and used for cakes and pastries. No specific measures are taken against melamine (and similar). As raw material no effective control is mandatory (list of specifications)
  - The rice protein concentrates is not imported
- We have also investigated with our colleagues in the Department of Agriculture concerning the use of melamine as fertilizer (*as a potential source of food chain contamination or adulteration*):
  - They had no information about this type of Fertilizer.

# The melamine case :

## The lesson learned

- Before the American mailing we didn't feel "concerned" by the pet food recall.
- The investigation taught us that human safety could be concerned in our country :
  - in the list of specifications nothing specified melamine as contaminant to be "free of"
  - France is importing from China a lot of the suspicious raw material (is the traceability relevant enough to show the origin of the components?).
- No lab is searching such chemical contamination because no need was expressed by controllers.
- We have to be aware of all the "new" or unforeseen hazards.
- The importance of information exchange.

# Cholera case :

## The event

- In October 2007 we received an official mailing from a European country claiming that a tourist contracted a *Vibrio cholerea* after a journey in Tunisia.
- No long investigation is needed in such case, because there has been no cholera cases in Tunisia since the 80's: cholera can't be hidden!

# Cholera case :

## The lesson learned

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- Before setting up an alert, national authorities have to check the information.
- The technical relationship could be more useful than official ways (at least as a first step).

# CONCLUSION

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All these examples (as well as other ones) have lead us to undertake a national study with the aim to organize firstly the national level.

# A preliminary investigation

- Demonstrates the lack of efficiency of the actual status :
  - the lack of communication between the numerous alert systems related in food -even if each system is efficient for itself-
  - the need of a national network which could be the interface with regional and international alert systems
- The national network :
  - standardised procedures
  - concerted response
  - excellent, credible and complementary lab network.
- This national network has to run under the new food law we are building, which is harmonized with the European one (178/2002)

# Our second priority

- the international level
- closely linked to INFOSAN which is working under IHR (*and have to improve its own system too*).



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# The third priority

- to establish a coordinated, functional regional network of regulators.
- This second level couldn't be based on “geography” only but also on “economy” (our best clients).



THANK YOU