



Food Hygiene Inspections: Australia should adopt world's best practice

Each year NSW food outlets which do not apply appropriate hygiene standards cause about one million cases of food poisoning. Contaminated food puts about 18,000 Australians in hospital and causes 120 deaths annually.

The Lemna Government rejected Greens amendments to the Food Act that would have required all inspection notices to be posted on the internet and on a prominent place at the entrance to the restaurant. The Food Authority's website register of penalty notices fails to reveal whether food outlets that are not listed have been inspected. Some restaurants may not have been inspected for years. While some Council areas are thorough in their inspections, others are under-resourced and rarely check on eateries in their area.

NSW food safety inspection standards need to be brought up to world's best practice. Consumers need access to reliable information about the results of a restaurant's food safety inspection.

Name and shame on food inspection results will provide a substantial financial incentive for restaurants to maintain clean premises and hygienic practices. The health of citizens is much more important than protecting an undeserved good reputation of a particular food premise.

If inspection results are published – not just offences and penalty notices - then customers will have confidence that the restaurant where they have chosen to dine has good food safety practices.

It will reduce the incidence of food poisoning, save lives, and reduce hospitalisation resulting in financial savings for the health system.

Food poisoning is a preventable illness and inspections that disclose health risks are a key preventative measure.

Europe and the USA

In parts of Europe and the USA, the latest inspection results are either posted to the door of the restaurant or available on the internet. Hygiene scores are placed in restaurant windows in Los Angeles and in New York details are placed on the internet.

Similarly in Britain, Councils can sign up to a scheme where hygiene results are placed on restaurant doors, so consumers can make an informed choice.

Since 1997 LA County in the USA has required restaurants to display grade cards with either an A, B, or C, issued by Department of Health Services inspectors. Research reveals that this has caused an improvement in restaurant hygiene and reduced the incidence of food-related illnesses.

see: http://www.gsb.stanford.edu/news/research/stratman_consumerinfo.shtml

Canada

In Canada, city of Toronto's Dinesafe program requires food premises to be inspected and one of three types of notices to be displayed near the entrance to the premises:

- a pass which allows only minor infractions
- a conditional pass indicating significant infractions such as inadequate cleaning of food contact surfaces or equipment, or refrigeration or mechanical dish-washing equipment requiring repair. A Public Health Inspector will re-inspect the premises within 24 to 48 hours.
- "closed", issued where crucial infractions are observed such as evidence of rodent or insect infestations or contaminated food.

For more detail on the Dinesafe program see <http://app.toronto.ca/food2/overview.jsp>

For more details on the Greens NSW campaign for better food hygiene, visit www.johnkaye.org.au