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Editorial

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As we start a New Year I have begun to wonder what food safety and quality issues we will face. This past year has certainly delivered a number of food safety challenges which in many cases have been associated with the primary raw materials used in the supply and manufacture of foods. It is important to remember that not all of the foods that we consume will undergo some form of thermal processing so extra care is required in the cultivation and handling of these raw crops. Once contamination has occurred, strategies for reducing subsequent food safety risks are difficult to implement, assuming that food-handling systems have been able to identify the risks in the first place. Often, the only strategy available to the food processor is to destroy the contaminated foodstuff. The negative impact of a food safety problem on the food processor's business may not solely be restricted to financial loss, but may extend to a loss of confidence with customers, retailers and ultimately consumers. The consequences of a food safety issue may last for many years beyond the actual event itself.

These financially stringent times in which we find ourselves may well lead to increased risks where food safety is concerned, especially if food processors seek to reduce costs and inadvertently relax safety procedures. Reducing food safety risks not only requires good inspection procedures but also requires the application of the necessary analytical tools. Even something as simple as a measurement of temperature requires the calibration of thermometers to ensure that safe maximum temperatures are not exceeded. I am often concerned when working in food-processing environments that the accuracy of something as basic as temperature measurement is not regularly monitored. If something this simple is ignored, what else may be missed?

It is perhaps the nature of our business to dwell on the problems associated with food safety and quality, but we should not ignore our successes. Some of the positives are associated with consistent improvements to the analytical methods that we introduce and apply to food safety – a key focus for this journal. These improvements come in part from reactions to problems, but more significantly, they commonly derive from collaborative projects. In the current economic climate, funds for research projects have been tightly squeezed and undoubtedly they will continue to be squeezed for some years to come. In such circumstances, our collaborations need to be as cost-effective as we can make them and we need to show good value for the public purse.

In the past I have appealed for effective communication with consumers and in addition now I would appeal for effective communication with our research funds providers. We need to get clear messages to our paymasters that proactive research into food safety and quality needs continued funding, not least because the human and financial costs arising from reacting to problems with food safety far outweigh the cost of preventing them in the first place.

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