

Editorial Commentary

SAFETY OF “SACHET WATER” AND RAW MILK

In recent times non-biodegradable materials, especially containers of commercially bagged drinking water has been a source of environmental concern to public health institutions and metropolitan, municipal and district administrations. These containers are not properly disposed of after use and choke drains and fill refuse dumping sites. Apart from the environmental problems these containers are sources of stagnant water conducive to the breeding of mosquitoes. The regulatory environment in which manufacturers of sachet water operate has seen marked challenges and there is proliferation of manufacturers with little or no control of the industry.

In this issue of the journal, Nauku et al (page 58) present findings that indicate contamination of some of these commercially prepared “sachet water”, as they are popularly called. The authors found enteric pathogenic protozoan, other organic and inorganic materials in a number of the water samples examined. The pathogenic organisms are reported to include their infective stages. The authors state that “Vital information required for the protection of consumers was lacking on some of the water sachets. None of the brands had batch numbers and all the packs had no records of the dates of manufacture. Contact addresses were however indicated on all the packs and 23/27 (85.2%) of the packs had the expiry dates printed on the sachets”. In addition, some of the products did not have the stamp of approval of the National Standard Board. This study does not report on bacterial contamination but there is information pointing to bacterial contamination as a major problem. It is disturbing that faecal contamination of the source water or the manufacturing process appears to play a significant role.

In another article by Donkor et al (page 62) in this issue of the journal enterobacteria contamination

of informally marketed raw milk obtained from the two major cities in Ghana is reported. The contamination reflects the unhygienic means of milking. The organisms isolated are potential causes of gastrointestinal diseases. The practice of pooling milk samples also augments the risk of infection by the organisms identified in the samples. Although mycobacteria were not found in higher proportions in this study, it is important that these be in focus in relation to consumption of raw milk.

Water and sanitation are predominant aspects of human health and development. These two papers highlight major potential health implications of poor hygienic practices in the manufacture and processing of water and milk and the role of poor sanitation in many communities. The reports also highlight the need for strengthening regulatory control of production of water, food and beverages and the enforcement of standards of production. Already diarrhoeal diseases (protozoan or bacterial in origin) pose a heavy burden on the health care systems and development of many low income countries, with the heaviest burden falling on children under 5 years of age.

Access to good drinking water is a necessity for all. However, when products like water and informally marketed milk are handled such that they pose a threat to human life, all must be done to control and regulate their manufacturing and sale to the public. The time has come for the local authorities to enforce regulations and bye laws that will ensure that consumers are not exposed to health risks when patronizing these products

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