

CMAJ 2011 election survey: food safety

The culprits in 2005 were bean sprouts tainted by *Salmonella*. In 2006, it was *Escherichia coli*-laced spinach imported from the United States. Two years later, at least 20 Canadians died after eating Ontario-made cold cuts permeated with *Listeria monocytogenes*. The list of unsafe foods ingested by Canadians goes on and on, which has prompted many health experts to call for the federal government to improve Canada's food inspection and safety system.

Neither the public sector nor private companies do an acceptable job of preventing food-borne illnesses, according to critics, who say Canada lacks an adequate active surveillance system and is unable to effectively trace tainted foods to their source (www.cmaj.ca/cgi/doi/10.1503/cmaj.110453). As a result, annual episodes of food-related gastroenteritis total at least 11 million, and that may be a low estimate considering how many cases go unreported.

Canada performs particularly poorly in the area of traceability, the measure of how well a country can track food items along the pathway from "farm-to-fork." In a recent analysis of food safety in 17 countries, Canada ranked last in this category (www.schoolofpublicpolicy.sk.ca/_documents/_publications_reports/food_safety_final.pdf). "Canada was the only country to earn a lower grade in 2010 compared with 2008," the report states. "While it does have tracking systems for its livestock industry, it is still developing a farm-to-fork traceability system."

So it is perhaps no surprise that the political parties that participated in CMAJ's 2011 election survey claimed, if elected, that they would make changes to ensure fewer Canadians fall victim to food-borne illnesses.

The Liberals vowed to review how effectively the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) coordinates its efforts with other health regulators to minimize risks in the food safety system, while investing an additional \$50



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At least 20 Canadians died after eating contaminated cold cuts in 2008.

million to improve that system, particularly in the area of food imports.

The New Democrats would hire 200 new food inspectors, improve labels on food to relay nutritional information and enhance traceability. They would also introduce a national food strategy that would "combine health goals, environmental goals, food quality objectives, local and organic choices for consumers across the country."

The Bloc Québécois expressed concerns about the influence that the food industry has in managing food inspection, and about the CFIA's conflicting roles as protector of public safety and promoter of trade. The Bloc would push for the hiring of more food inspectors and veterinarians, and would call for the removal of barriers that prevent inspectors from quickly taking action when potential hazards arise.

The Conservatives, meanwhile, declined to participate in the CMAJ survey. The party said all policy questions can be answered by perusing its platform. While their platform does make passing reference to strengthening food safety, almost all mentions of food are with respect to commercial matters, such as

expanding international markets for farmers and revising "burdensome approval processes" to provide farmers easier access to fertilizers, pesticides and veterinary drugs. — Roger Collier, CMAJ

Survey question: What changes would you make to Canada's food inspection and safety system?

Conservative response:

No response. Rather than participate in CMAJ's 2011 election survey, the Conservatives forwarded a weblink to their party platform. Asked what the rationale was for declining participation, party spokesperson Ryan Sparrow says the weblink constitutes a response to the survey. "That response is the response from the campaign."

Liberal response:

"Canadians expect all foods within Canada to meet the same quality, safety and environmental sustainability standards, regardless of whether that food is produced at home or abroad. A Liberal government will:

- Conduct a comprehensive review of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA), Health Canada and the Public Health Agency of Canada

(PHAC), to ensure effective coordination of Canada's food safety system to minimize risks and assure Canadians that the food on their tables is safe.

- Invest an additional \$50 million over four years to improve food inspection by the CFIA and to ensure the same food safety standards set for Canadian producers are applied to foods imported into Canada.”

New Democrat response:

“New Democrats will introduce a Canadian Food Strategy that will combine health goals, environmental goals, food quality objectives, local and organic choices for consumers across the country. An NDP government will increase food safety by hiring 200 new food inspectors for the Canadian Food Inspection Agency and strengthen the Canada Food Inspection Agency's capacity to prevent, detect and respond to food borne illness outbreaks and ensure imported foods meet the same environmental and health standards that apply to food produced in Canada. Finally, New Democrats will enact legislation to require proper labelling of food with information on its origin, its nutritional value and whether it is genetically modified or not.”

Bloc Québécois response:

“À la suite de l'éclosion de nom-

breux cas de listériose et du décès de 22 personnes, les consommateurs ont réalisé que même les produits canadiens représentaient un risque pour leur santé. Ces événements sont d'autant plus inquiétants qu'ils semblent être la conséquence d'un projet pilote gouvernemental sur l'autorégulation de l'industrie dans le domaine de l'inspection des aliments.

Une des préoccupations fréquemment soulevées sur la réglementation des aliments au Québec et au Canada a trait à la question de l'indépendance, de l'objectivité et de la transparence de la science relativement à l'évaluation des technologies. Ainsi, nous croyons que, pour les mêmes raisons que l'industrie ne devrait jamais avoir le pouvoir de s'autoréguler complètement, l'Agence canadienne d'inspection des aliments ne devrait jamais avoir le mandat de

commercialiser les aliments et d'en assurer la salubrité.

C'est pourquoi le Bloc Québécois exige que le gouvernement fédéral : révisé le rôle de l'ACIA, notamment dans le but d'éviter qu'elle soit forcée de choisir entre son mandat de protéger la population et celui de promouvoir le commerce; mette de côté l'idée de laisser l'industrie gérer complètement l'inspection des aliments, ce qui revenait à mettre entre leurs mains la santé des citoyens; crée 1000 nouveaux postes d'inspecteurs et de vétérinaires afin d'assurer le respect de la réglementation; élimine les obstacles qui empêchent le personnel d'inspection de prendre des mesures adéquates lorsqu'ils constatent un danger potentiel pour la santé publique.”

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Editor's note: Sixth of a series of stories on *CMAJ*'s 2011 election survey:

Part 1: Health transfers (www.cmaj.ca/cgi/doi/10.1503/cmaj.109-3865)

Part 2: Pharmacare (www.cmaj.ca/cgi/doi/10.1503/cmaj.109-3870)

Part 3: Health human resources (www.cmaj.ca/cgi/doi/10.1503/cmaj.109-3875)

Part 4: Home/palliative care (www.cmaj.ca/cgi/doi/10.1503/cmaj.109-3876)

Part 5: Research (www.cmaj.ca/cgi/doi/10.1503/cmaj.109-3877)