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Meat, food safety a necessity

The past few weeks have been dominated by reports of meat being preserved using formalin, a drug used on dead bodies.

Meat is part of food for many people. Food is a basic need. Once a baby is born health, their first expression is to open the mouth and signal their need for food.

Everyone needs food daily to grow or to survive. People eat food in varying quantities and times daily. Majority eat three meals a day while others eat less or more times in a day.

Veterinarians are responsible for securing the safety of animal source foods such as meat given that everyone eats food several times a day and usually in large quantities. We support the notion that everything possible ought to be done to ensure that food, particularly foods of animal origin, such as milk fed to Ugandan babies from as early as one week while the emancipated and empowered mother goes to work, are safe and of high quality. Veterinary drugs and acaricides must be properly regulated, handled, stored and used in food animals to ensure minimal chemical residues in eggs, milk and meat.



There is need to establish a robust food safety system throughout the country along the various value chains from the farmer to the consumer. This requires close monitoring by veterinarians

Veterinarians promote animal health and production, animal welfare, veterinary public health and food safety. In promoting animal health and production, we advise farmers on nutrition, pasture establishments, shelter requirements, good animal husbandry practices and herd or flock health, vaccination schedules for the different animal species and diseases and in case of sick animals we treat using appropriate veterinary drugs and regimens. To achieve animal welfare, we advise farmers on the five freedoms for animals i.e. freedom from hunger and thirst, discomfort, pain, injury and disease, to express normal behaviour, and from fear and discomfort.

Veterinary public health and food safety is achieved by advising farmers on the appropriate use of veterinary drugs and acaricides to promote adherence to withdraw periods before animal products from treated animals enter into the food value chain, and transporting animals appropriately to the slaughter house. This can be strengthened by ensuring that there is capacity to test the milk and live animals for drug or chemical residues before the milk is accepted at the milk collection point or an animal is accepted for slaughter. In addition, we need a strong traceability and identification system to trace an animal from the farm to the slaughter house, processing point and follow the products from a particular animal up to the super market shelves to ensure that meat from a condemned animal does not reach the consumer. Short of this, safety of animal products cannot be guaranteed. In the current circumstances, for us to hold the butcher operators accountable for the drug or chemical residues in the meat that was taken to the laboratory, we need results for chemical residues obtained from the same animals at the farm before they left for the slaughterhouse or abattoir.

Since the onset of civilization, people have been concerned about food quality and safety although the regulation of food by national governments is much more recent and has varying faces from developing to developed countries. Several developments such as rapid development of chemistry brought new food additives and colours which ushered in more challenges for the food industry requiring advanced scientific methods to detect food adulteration. The shift in food production from the home to the factory also meant that the responsibility of ensuring the safety of foods shifted from consumers and local governments to processors, retailers and central governments.

The birth of modern food regulation in the US in 1906 followed media exposures by journalists in response to public concerns about widespread adulteration of food, use of chemical preservatives which adulterated the food. The reporters highlighted frauds and dangers in the food industry such as use of poisonous preservatives and dyes in foods besides nauseating practices and unsanitary conditions in the meat packing industry that caught public attention.

Currently, food safety globally is threatened by food fraud. Food fraud is the fraudulent intentional contamination of food with a variety of chemicals or biological agents and other substances harmful to public health. Food fraud is the deliberate substitution, dilution, misbranding or counterfeiting, addition of unapproved enhancements, tampering, or misrepresentation of food ingredients, food packaging or false or misleading statements or claims made about food products for economic gain.

In Uganda, food fraud may take the form of rice or beans sellers deliberately adding five kilogrammes of stones to 45Kgs of rice or beans to make it 50Kgs and then sells to the unsuspecting customers. It might mean a tomato farmer or trader spraying tomatoes with a certain chemical that may be harmful to the consumers, so as to extend its shelf life before transportation to the market. It can be adding cassava flour into wheat flour or mixing jack fruit seeds with ground nuts before grinding or disguising sheep for goats after slaughter and selling mutton to a consumer who asks for goat meat only to miss the goatish smell during consumption. Food fraud is intended to dupe consumers and make abnormal profits.

There is need to establish a robust food safety system throughout the country along the various value chains from the farmer to the consumer. This requires close monitoring by veterinarians, if they are provided with the appropriate means of transport to reach every farm no matter the terrain, only then can we detect and prevent food fraud of various forms.

We should inculcate a food safety culture in Ugandans by creating food safety expectations, educating and training all key stakeholders, communicating food safety frequently, amplify consumer voices, establish food safety goals and measurements, and institute punitive punishments for food safety misbehaviours.

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