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Peter Morton is the season that foodborne illnesses are at their annual peak. Why is that? ... simply because of the HEAT! In many places, we recognize the summer for its repressive heat waves, picnics, all-day beach outings, cook-outs, barbecues, pot-luck get-togethers, etc. At many of these, foods may spend an extended time at abusive temperature conditions, allowing low levels of foodborne pathogens that may not cause illness to reach higher levels that can certainly cause illness. The simple act of storing groceries in a hot summer car trunk or making a quick stop on the way home while the groceries heat up in the hot car can be enough to warm certain sensitive products to either spoil or become more prone to causing illness. Barbecues are another potential culprit where a) insufficiently cooked meat/poultry, b) cross-contamination of raw to cooked meat/poultry may occur (i.e., picking up cooked hamburger with a spatula that was just used to pick up and place raw hamburgers on the grill), c) uncovered foods allow flies.

Burning Issues
Food allergens: the leading cause of food recalls

Food ranks among the highest sources of human allergens (29 percent) along with drugs (29 percent), dust/insects (4 percent), epidermals (6 percent), grasses/weeds (11 percent), mixes (10 percent), occupational (9 percent), molds (8 percent) and trees (9 percent).

When the Food and Drug Administration or U.S. Department of Agriculture finds pathogenic bacteria in foods that should not be there, these foods are recalled. However, the leading cause of food recalls is not due to bad bugs, but due to mislabeling, which is the technically correct name given to a recall when there is an accidental inclusion of an allergen that was not intended to be there.

Accurate labeling is important so those people who demonstrate allergic reactions to various food substances may be able to identify that on the label and stay away from those foods. That is why when there is a mistake or mixup during manufacture, whereby a known allergen is put into a food but does not appear on the label, it will be subject to a recall to remove that product from commerce before anyone can consume it unwittingly and forego a possible allergic reaction.

Sanitary design of facilities and equipment

One of the recurring themes in prevention of foodborne illnesses is to eliminate how foodborne pathogens can access processed foods. Keeping a 'clean environment' is more difficult than most lay people realize. This is especially important in ready-to-eat foods, where no further cooking is required by consumers.

Often, a food processing facility has existed from earlier times before processors had become aware of new methods of preventing the distribution of pathogens within food processing facilities and therefore, can only work within the framework of the existing layout unless an extensive and comprehensive overhaul of the facility occurs.

Processors should require equipment manufacturers to design safe equipment.
A recent report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Food and Drug Administration and the U.S. Department of Agriculture has indicated important declines in various foodborne pathogenic illnesses. These agencies have been cooperating in a concerted effort to record incidences of illness, investigate outbreaks and research ways they can be prevented or reduced.

A national health initiative (Healthy People 2010) was advanced by the president and administered through the Department of Health and Human Services and sets 467 objectives to improve the health of Americans by 2010. Among the objectives are various food safety goals to reduce foodborne illness.

The data released in April 2005 showed that from 1996-2004, Salmonella infections decreased 8 percent, E. coli O157:H7 illnesses decreased 42 percent, those due to Campylobacter decreased 31 percent, those due to Yersinia decreased 45 percent, and those due to Cryptosporidium decreased 40 percent. The report can be found online at www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5414a2.htm.

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the information be etched onto the equipment surface. Another identified ‘sanitary defect’ are square aluminum or stainless steel frames for equipment. If the square tubular metal frames are positioned square to the floor, the top surface allows standing water to collect after each washing (or processing spill), thereby harboring bacteria in the ‘puddle’ that collects on the surface.

Positioning tubular equipment frames, such that the square cross-section is positioned like a diamond with the top surface being a point that causes water to run off the metal frames, would prevent water retention. Such changes may be costly to an equipment manufacturer and may not be put in place without an incentive (i.e., marketed as ‘sanitary friendly’ or forced by threat of loss of client account).