



Getting it out there

Earlier this year, the FDA's Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition (CFSAN) announced the creation of a new Office of Food Safety, Defense and Outreach (OFSDO).

Food Safety editor Alice Sharp spoke with the OFSDO's Director, David Acheson, MD, Chief Medical Officer and former Director of the Food Safety and Security Staff (FSSS), to find out more.

FS. Can you give a little background to the creation of the new office – why was the move felt necessary?

DA. The previous office was responsible for food defense and food safety issues and had a small staff that developed educational materials in those areas. At the same time, another part of the center was conducting nutrition related educational outreach activities while still another part operated an information hotline, which responds to enquiries from consumers and industry about CFSAN regulated products. It was a logical step to put these educational and outreach functions into a single office, and this is what we have done with the OFSDO. The food defense part was already in the office and has remained there.

FS. So, to clarify, is the office disseminating information just to consumers or to industry as well?

DA. We are disseminating information to all of our stakeholders, which includes federal partners, state and local governments, industry, consumers and health partners.

FS. How important is the visibility of the office and the openness of the FDA's message on current issues?

DA. One of the main goals of the office is to increase FDA's profile as a resource for information on food safety, food defense, nutrition and cosmetics. There is a great deal of talent at FDA – a lot of knowledge and a lot of expertise. What this office will be able to do effectively through consolidating our outreach activities is to provide a consistent message to our stakeholders and to be more proactive in trying to communicate important public health messages when the need arises.

FS. Openness is clearly very important, but can you give too much information – where does the balance lie between keeping everyone informed and potentially causing panic?

DA. If someone has a specific question then we would address it. That might lead to providing additional information or to discussing other related issues. Importantly, if the question relates to a particular topic then the information must be focused. One example is the issue of mercury in fish; last year, we developed an advisory with EPA that targeted a specific subset of the population – pregnant women and women who may become pregnant, nursing mothers and young children. That was an active education campaign where we went out to a targeted group with information about a specific contaminant. Information overload is certainly a concern so it is important for us to carefully develop messages so they are easily understood.

FS. What about when the issue in question is perhaps controversial or the message is not clear-cut? Do you relay all of the scientific facts or an official FDA message?

DA. All of the policies that the agency has are based on scientific fact. But, as we are all aware, some science is more solid than others. There may be conflicts and polar views on what the science represents and sometimes there are diametrically opposed results.

Our job is to try to find the balance and come out with what we consider to be the most appropriate overall public health message. That message may be that there is currently conflicting science on the issue and FDA is continuing to look at it. As the science evolves, we will amend our message accordingly. Alternatively, the science may be very clear-cut and the message similarly straightforward.

Of course, the office itself is not generating policy; we are working very closely with the scientific experts and program offices within our Center to develop the messages that they feel are important. They are the technical experts and we work in conjunction with them.

FS. And when it comes to disseminating information to industry stakeholders, what kind of information are we talking about? Is it providing guidance in complying with requirements such as the Bioterrorism Act, for example?

DA. That is a big part of it and the Bioterrorism Act is actually one of the main things we have been working on in the last few years. While the individual consumer is not going to be particularly interested in the need to register a company, etc., it is something that the industry not only has an interest in but needs to know about in order to comply with the new regulations. We are certainly involved with targeted industry outreach if, for example, they need to know about regulatory changes.

Another thing we are trying to do is increase industry's general awareness about food defense – for example, encouraging companies to assess their vulnerabilities. We are not, therefore, simply delivering a message about a new rule or the requirements of the industry, but are also trying more generally to increase industry awareness and educate our stakeholders on the issues about which they need to be concerned. ■

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