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Management of Public Health Disasters, Section-001

Salad Bar Salmonella Report

The Wasco-Sherman Public Health Department in Oregon started receiving reports of cases of gastroenteritis on September 17, 1984.^[1] A few days before becoming unwell, the sick people had eaten at one of two restaurants.^[1] Fever, chills, nausea, vomiting, discomfort, and bloody feces were among the symptoms of the illness.^[1] Salmonella Typhimurium has been identified as a bacterium.^{[1][2]} The health officials in the Oregon town of The Dalles shut down all salad bars since many of those sick had consumed food from them.^[1] The salad bar food items, such as macaroni, potato, four-bean or pea salad, and later blue cheese dressing, were identified as the vehicles of transmission and the likely time of contamination during the epidemiologic investigation carried out by the CDC Epidemic Intelligence Service (EIS) investigators.^{[1][2]} The case criteria were met by 751 individuals, 45 of whom were hospitalized.^[1] Only 8 Salmonella Typhimurium cases were found in the town over the three years preceding this epidemic.^[1] The epidemic curve was found to be biphasic.^[1] The first wave of illness peaked on September 15, and September 19 through October 10 saw the peak of the second wave.^[1]

Environmental contamination research found only modest sanitation (unhygienic) food handling procedures at diverse restaurants, no common food distributors, and no water line breaks.^[1] By the middle of October 1984, the pandemic was over.^[1] EIS officials questioned the managers of the impacted eateries for any odd incidences or irate staff members.^[1] The County Sheriff's office and Oregon State Police received reports of suspicious activities.^[1] At this point, nothing suspicious was discovered, and the case was closed.^[1] There was no mention of the shared source, the real cause of the outbreak was found a year later, during a criminal investigation of Rajneesh Puram cult members.^[2] To keep many people from being sick and absent from the impending municipal elections, they distributed the culture in local restaurants.^[1] Members of the cult tried to sway the election in their favor.^[1] At this time, the FBI got engaged in the investigation.^[1] The offenders entered a guilty plea in April 1986, and they received a 4.5-year prison term. "Conspiring to tamper with consumer items by poisoning food" was the charge.^[1]

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Reference:

1. T J Török, R V Tauxe, R P Wise, J R Livengood, R Sokolow, S Mauvais, K A Birkness, M R Skeels, J M Horan, L R Foster (1997). A large community outbreak of salmonellosis caused by intentional contamination of restaurant salad bars. PMID: 9244330, DOI: [10.1001/jama.1997.03550050051033](https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.1997.03550050051033)
2. Center for Disease Control and Prevention, October 20, 2022, <https://www.cdc.gov/salmonella/index.html>