Information:
As indicated in PH06007, food premise inspection data for the City of Hamilton indicates that the level of food safety compliance among food premises, while high, does not appear to be increasing. Compliance is measured primarily by tracking the number of re-inspections that must be conducted in order to verify that infractions noted during a routine inspection have been corrected. On average, among high and medium risk food premises, one re-inspection for every four routine inspections conducted is required for this verification.

Wishing to both increase compliance and improve inspection program efficiencies, the Public Health Services, Health Protection Division is exploring potential modifications to its inspection program, including the possibility of increasing the number of routine inspections carried out. The Division has therefore undertaken a study, in collaboration with the McMaster Institute of Environment and Health, to assess the impact of inspection frequency on the above-noted factors.

The study, which focuses on high risk restaurants in Hamilton, is being conducted as follows:

- Currently, there are approximately 500 high risk restaurants operating in the City. From this group, two sub-groups of 100 restaurants have been randomly selected.
- One sample group has been assigned an inspection frequency of five times per year; the other a frequency of four times per year.
- The remaining 300 restaurants serve as the control group and are being inspected at the provincially mandated minimum inspection frequency of three times per year.

Compliance with safe food practices will be tracked across all three groups over the course of 2006. The following indicators will be used to measure compliance:
• the number of critical and non-critical violations identified per routine inspection*  
• the number of re-inspections that must be scheduled to achieve compliance  
• the number of enforcement actions required (orders, summons and provincial offence notices)

Inspection efficiencies for 2006 will be assessed by

• comparing the average number of required visits per premise across study groups  
• comparing the average annual cumulative inspection time per premise across study groups

Should the efficiency findings be positive, they could translate into:

• Reductions in the overall number of required inspections by reducing the number of complaints and re-inspections  
• Decreases in the amount of time required to conduct individual inspections through increased compliance (high risk restaurant inspections currently take approximately 90 minutes.)

The findings may also contribute to the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care’s initiative to revise the Food Safety Mandatory Programs and Services Guideline for Food Safety.

The study is being conducted with existing resources and represents an average increase in workload of only nine inspections per inspector over the course of the year.

Elizabeth Richardson  
Medical Officer of Health  
Public Health Services

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* Critical violations are food handling errors that pose significant risk of food borne illness. They fall into three broad categories: inadequate cooking and hot/cold holding; opportunity for cross contamination; inadequate hand washing or unnecessary hand contact with food. Critical violations must be dealt with quickly and re-inspections must be conducted for violations that can not be permanently corrected during the initial inspection.

Non-critical violations, unless extreme, do not pose a direct and significant risk of food borne illness. They include inadequate sanitation, equipment and surfaces in poor repair, and inadequate pest control. Such items are however contrary to good operating practices and, if left unresolved for long periods of time, can contribute to risk. Therefore, non-critical violations must be addressed during inspections and compliance schedules must be set.