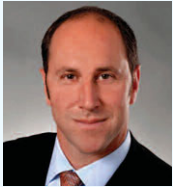




# Our Infected Food Chain: Lessons from Groundhog Day



An *E. coli* outbreak, believed to have originated from a crop of bean sprouts in Northern Germany, has killed at least 36 people across Europe.

Watching the public health “crisis” unfold, I can’t help but think of the 1993 comedy “Groundhog Day.” Phil Connors (Bill Murray), an egotistical meteorologist from Pittsburgh tasked with covering the annual Groundhog Day in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, finds himself caught in a time warp in which he is forced to relive the events of the same day over and over again. By the end of the movie, Connors is able to break free of the endlessly repeating time loop when he uses his knowledge and experience to learn from past mistakes, stop his selfish ways, and begin helping people.

We seem to be stuck in a similar time warp when it comes to foodborne illness outbreaks. These outbreaks are not new, follow similar patterns, create fear and panic, cost millions of dollars, and are responsible for considerable collateral damage. Yet policymakers continue to repeat the same mistakes, afraid to make tough choices and forgo short-term self-interest to create a better, more sustainable future.

Crises like the current one in Europe will generate a lot of fleeting interest from health officials and politicians alike, but will quickly die down as the offending source is eradicated from the food chain and the natural cycle of the outbreak dies down. Then the next crisis dawns and then it’s Groundhog Day all over again. Perhaps this is an opportunity for a little self-reflection and enlightenment.

Are public health agencies and politicians doing their part to protect us from unnecessary harm? What is the interplay between public health policy, special interests, and public will in determining our response? What are the long-term costs of current food handling and agribusiness policy?

Consider the following:

- “Safe handling” by consumers does not guarantee safety (eg, washing contaminated vegetables will not eliminate *E. coli*).
- Separation of livestock from vegetable farms is critical to preventing outbreaks, yet regulations are loose and under-enforced.
- Indiscriminate use of livestock antibiotics almost certainly contributes to resistant foodborne illness.

- Overcrowding and other corporate farming practices almost certainly contribute to higher rates of foodborne illness.
- The rate of antibiotic-resistant infections (MRSA, *C. difficile*, etc.) is far outpacing the research and discovery of new antibiotics to fight them.
- Trying to outsmart the adaptability of pathogens is a losing battle.
- Adapting practices at all levels to reduce antibiotic resistance is prudent and necessary.
- Responding to public health scares is expensive.
- Collateral damage is significant. Foodborne illness scares cost many innocent producers millions of dollars of lost income. The same thing now happening in Europe happened to US spinach farmers during the *E. coli* outbreak in 2006, which spread to 26 states, infecting 199 people, including three who died. That outbreak was sourced to a few farms in California, yet all producers were affected.

However, the will to reform is lacking:

- Political will to reform agribusiness is limited, and special interests are very powerful and resistant to any reforms.
- Public will for higher food prices is nonexistent, despite the well-known risks associated with the very corporate farming practices used to lower costs.

The American people, and increasingly the rest of the world, are highly motivated by cheap food in large quantities. Yet safe and sustainable agribusiness practices will be necessary to break the cycle of multi-drug-resistant foodborne outbreaks. We will only escape from this endlessly repeating time loop when we use our knowledge and experience to learn from past mistakes, stop our selfish ways, and begin helping people! ■

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