

Oral Questions

health danger. So there has been an alert even extended further today, for example, to include shellfish.

What I am trying to convey to the hon. gentleman, the decision that was taken today, the information came to the Department at 9.15 this morning and I made the decision at 9.18. I made it on the basis that we had the mussel incident, we had the clam evidence yesterday, and the action that was taken, and the alert today on shellfish. But I had an evidentiary track that gave me information that I could make a decision under the Health and Welfare Act. I did not have any information—I repeat to the Hon. Member—I did not have any information given to me prior to the Monday, which I told the Hon. Member about, and the alert after the medical evidence had been together on the Tuesday.

I have been totally open, totally frank with it. I have nothing to hide, nor am I trying to hide anything. But I want the Hon. Member to understand, and the people of Canada to understand, that a Minister can only act on the basis of evidence. That is why today's decision was made on the basis differently from the one on the Tuesday, and I think any reasonable person could understand why.

[*Translation*]

HEALTH OF CANADIANS—MINISTER'S POSITION

Mr. Jacques Guilbault (Saint-Jacques): Mr. Speaker, on Saturday evening, November 28, Mr. Pomeroy of Montreal ate mussels because he was unaware of the danger involved. Yet 24 hours earlier, the day before, November 27, the lab mice tested by Health and Welfare Canada had all died as a result of toxins in the mussels.

I should like to know how the Minister, responsible as he is for the health of Canadians, can justify waiting four days—until 6.45 p.m. on December 1—before sounding general alarm. Why did the Minister choose to play Russian roulette with the health of Canadians, and why is he still hanging on to his ministerial portfolio now that he has lost the confidence of Canadians?

• (1140)

[*English*]

Hon. Jake Epp (Minister of National Health and Welfare): Mr. Speaker, I am not playing Russian roulette with any person, with any person's life. What I am doing, on the Sunday, the stop shipment order which we have discussed in this House many times—

Ms. Copps: Which you did not know about.

An Hon. Member: Shut your mouth.

Mr. Epp (Provencher): —was a containment order—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I must remind the colleagues of the Minister that they are not making it any easier for him to handle a difficult situation. I would ask that Hon. Members refrain from making comments unless they are recognized.

Mr. Epp (Provencher): Just to finish my answer, on the Sunday, and the information that I gave when his Leader asked me for additional information on the Saturday and Sunday, which I gave, the stop shipment order is a containment activity by the Department, where there were approximately 30,000 pounds of mussels to be shipped, ready for shipment. We said to stop the shipment, we are investigating. That is what happened on the Sunday. That is logical. That is the way the Department has functioned and that is the way I have got to accept it, and I would suggest that he would accept it.

In the terms of bringing in the death of Mr. Pomeroy, probably nobody, other than the family, feels as badly about as I do. If I could have done something differently, or would have known something, I would have done something differently. I did not have that information.

[*Translation*]

RESULTS OF LABORATORY EXPERIMENTS—MINISTER'S OBLIGATION TO KNOW THEM AND TO MAKE THEM PUBLIC

Mr. Jacques Guilbault (Saint-Jacques): Mr. Speaker, that the Minister should tell us that he thought stopping the shipments was enough is simply incredible. Everybody knows there were hundreds of pounds of mussels across the country in refrigerators at restaurants and stores. That is what the Minister fails to understand.

It is unacceptable that the Minister was not informed immediately of the results of laboratory experiments that were already sufficiently conclusive to justify a public alert on November 27. It is unthinkable that the Minister should tolerate this lack of communication within his Department and with the public. And yet the Minister insists he didn't know!

Well, I would like to ask him whether he doesn't think he should have known and above all, should have informed the public.

[*English*]

Hon. Jake Epp (Minister of National Health and Welfare): Mr. Speaker, I go back to the stop shipment in which I say to my colleague that that is not an unusual procedure. That is a regular part of the procedures the Department uses and so that we would not have further spread of the mussels until we had our medical evidence.

If there is a better method to do the communications, on the basis of hindsight and on the basis of that experience, of course that is my responsibility and the Department's to improve on that. But I think we have to keep it in perspective and look at it as the dates developed rather than making the judgments as he did so easily or so conclusively from his mind that everybody knew and everybody could predict both in science and medicine every eventuality.

SHIPMENT STOP ORDER—TIMING OF PUBLIC WARNING

Mr. Howard McCurdy (Windsor—Walkerville): Mr. Speaker, as a microbiologist who has in fact carried out this test for Gonyaulax, I must say that what we see here is an