

Food and Drugs Act

Mr. Warren Allmand (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce): Mr. Speaker, I congratulate the hon. member for Waterloo (Mr. Saltsman) for introducing this bill. I intend to support it fully, being one of those who for many years have suffered from allergies. Over the years I have had to avoid many foods, on pain of suffering severe reactions if I ate foods to which I was particularly sensitive. I am therefore sympathetic to the problems of those who suffer from allergies. I have also introduced a bill similar to the hon. member's Bill C-56, which is far down the list and has no chance of being discussed during the present session.

When I first came here a few years ago I was made aware that the hon. member proposed to put before the house a bill similar to the present one, and I wrote him to tell him I supported it. The hon. member and I served on a committee a few years ago that studied the complaints of consumers and consumer organizations. Many appearing before the committee complained that present laws governing labelling are inadequate. They hoped we would recommend further legislation in our reports. In our interim and final reports to the minister—at that time to the registrar general—we recommended that legislation be introduced to require labels on food products in Canada to specify the ingredients of those products.

● (5:10 p.m.)

Some manufacturers and citizens seem to think that is not necessary. They say that an informed consumer, a consumer who wants to take his time, can look at the different products and decide what is good for him and what is not good for him. They criticize modern-day housewives and other purchasers and consumers, saying they are lazy and do not do the job that grandmother used to do. But the principal point is that today our consumer products, especially food products, have become much more complex than they were in grandmother's day.

Today we have foods in cans and in packages. We have specially prepared convenience foods, frozen foods, as a matter of fact completely frozen dinners with gravies and all sorts of sauces included in them. We have specially prepared baby foods which only became prominent on the Canadian market after the Second World War. Before the war most people prepared their babies' food.

Today we have many types of foods in packages and in forms that did not exist even 30 years ago, and they are becoming more and more complex. It is almost impossible for

[Mr. Saltsman.]

a consumer when he or she goes through a supermarket, picking up a package, a box or a tin, to know exactly what is in it. Usually the consumer knows the basic product. It might be a meat, a cereal or a vegetable, but because of the new types of processing there could be many other things added to it, different types of preservatives and other products to enhance the taste. It is most important that the Canadian consumer know clearly what he is buying.

This is particularly important for the allergy sufferer. I am familiar with several cases where people, particularly babies, nearly died, and there are even some cases of deaths. I have personal experience of one case. I know a family that gave their baby a particular baby food containing some egg. Of course they did not know the food contained an egg additive. The baby was extremely sensitive and allergic to the egg additive. It became violently ill and they got it to a hospital just in time to save its life. There is another example of a baby dying in Toronto. I have here a letter which says:

An extreme example along this line is a patient who was attending the allergy clinic at the Hospital for Sick Children. This child was known to be sensitive to walnut. He was given a candy which contained a walnut inside of it and was dead before he arrived at the hospital.

There are many other examples. People who have allergy problems want to know what the contents are of the packages and the foods they buy.

This is not the only reason for requiring more explicit labelling. As the hon. member for Waterloo has said, whether we have allergy problems or not it is still important to know what we are getting. Many European countries have much more explicit labelling laws than Canada.

When we buy a product, whether it is a frozen food, a TV dinner, or a can of stew, we want to know what we are buying in addition to the main item in the can in case it is something we may not like, something we are allergic to, or just for general information purposes. We would also like to know what we are getting for our money. This was referred to by the hon. member for Waterloo. Sometimes the price of a food may seem to be extremely high compared with other foods. If we knew what the product consisted of we might have a greater appreciation of the price, and we would be more satisfied in buying the product if we knew what it contained.