

Food and Drugs Act

The Government is thus looking for a system that will require disclosure of selective and known offending substances in order to discourage misinterpretation of information or proliferation of misinformation leading to unnecessary self-diagnosis or diagnosis by unqualified non-medical practitioners. This is a typical problem and it is essential that the consumer be informed in a way that is meaningful to all concerned.

In resolving a problem of this complexity, it is vital to solicit input from all affected parties. In fact, this is the approach being taken by the Health Protection Branch of Health and Welfare Canada, and to date, Health and Welfare officials together with our colleagues at Consumer and Corporate Affairs have had consultations with the Canadian Restaurant and Food Services Association and the Allergy Information Association.

Consensus has been reached that a chart identifying the foods served in an establishment and whether or not they contain the allergens on the priority list was the most suitable mechanism for providing information required by a sensitive consumer. In this context, the Health Protection Branch of Health and Welfare Canada will also seek advice and input from the medical community on the proposed priority list of allergens.

Yes, it is a complex issue and many heads are at work to help allergy victims so that we can do what must be done as well as create something which is enforceable. The Canadian Restaurant and Food Services Association is currently testing the use of a food chart in some of the larger food chains and restaurants. It has accepted that it has a responsibility to protect to the best of its ability the customers who are at risk to allergy, and I believe that this will prove to be workable. As well, it is very welcome news. I compliment the restaurant association for this generous and caring thrust.

I also wonder, however, if we are going quite far enough. That is why I support this Bill which, if passed to committee, will initiate further study.

We have technology to call on and I want to suggest that we use that technology to simplify the listing process in another area, the major chain fast-food outlets which could be required to computer list all the ingredients of foods offered.

Fast-food outlets are very popular and usually offer a very limited number of dishes. The main problem here is the practice of subcontracting of ingredients, either precooked or uncooked. By making use of a computer, ingredient lists could be compiled and also automatically added to or subtracted from when subcontracts of certain ingredients change. All outlets would have access to accurate information with a simple push of a button. Secret recipes involved would not be jeopardized as the ingredients would be lumped together for each packaged item, and I think suppliers would likely not hesitate to co-operate.

The thrust I have just described added to the charting method for restaurants now being tested would allow a tremendous breakthrough in the restricted lives that allergy victims find themselves living. That is what I want. I want to help severe food-allergy victims enjoy a fuller life without jeopardizing their safety.

Let me assure all Hon. Members that people who have this extreme sensitivity to certain foods do not want to shirk their own responsibilities to look after themselves and their loved ones. They know full well that preparing all meals and snacks themselves is certainly one way to guard against tragedy, but lifestyles continue to change. Everyone eats outside the home well over 50 per cent of the time and the trend toward restaurant and fast-food outlet consumption continues.

Surely all Canadians have the right to enjoy the same lifestyles in this wonderful country and not to be subjected to the frustrations of being denied the knowledge of what is in the food prepared for them in public outlets. We are not talking about convenience, we are talking about life and death when it comes to victims of severe allergies.

• (1710)

The Hon. Member who brought this Bill forward has admitted that it is not perfect and I will not dwell on that, but its intent is sound. It should be supported by this House and moved into committee for further study so that amendments can be developed. I believe the need to assist severe allergy victims in Canada is well established and we are capable of developing forcible solutions to address that need which consumers in general will accept.

Mr. Neil Young (Beaches): Madam Speaker, I am pleased to have the opportunity to say a few words on Bill C-289, to amend the Food and Drugs Act, presented by the Hon. Member for Hamilton East (Ms. Copps). It gives us an opportunity to increase the awareness of Canadians about ingredients of food which could be harmful to them or members of their family.

I want to say at the outset that I do not intend to speak at any great length on this Bill. Just by presenting the Bill the Hon. Member has raised awareness around some general problems in the food industry which have been responded to very positively by the industry, particularly through the appearance of the Canadian Restaurant and Food Services Association before the Standing Committee on National Health and Welfare on several occasions. They were quite frank in recognizing that a problem exists and they desire to do something about it.

The Hon. Member also recognizes that her Bill will create some problems, particularly for small restaurant operators. Yet there is absolutely no doubt that the Canadian public wants to see some action along the lines proposed by the Hon. Member. Indeed, the Hon. Member who just finished speaking referred to the sentiments expressed by his own constituents and others.