

*Food and Drugs Act*

a first step in this area. Recently the Searle Drug Company of Canada announced that it was going to be listing non-medicinal ingredients in its drug products, both over the counter and prescription. This has never been done before, and it has been a problem to people who suffer from allergies from non-medicinal ingredients. I believe that that is a very important step in the similar problem that we face today.

Many Members of the House have spoken to constituents who suffer from food allergies and who say it is very important to list food ingredients in restaurants. I believe that the Government and the House of Commons can find a solution to this problem.

The statistics are quite frightening to anyone with a serious food allergy. In the past two years 24 Canadians have died, and 25,000 others are at risk every day. These numbers indicate quite clearly that food sensitivity is a real and serious problem, and one that we as legislators cannot ignore. Similar problems in the areas of food allergies and adverse reactions have been successfully addressed in the recent past.

In the early 1980s sulphites, which are a group of substances that have been widely used as preservatives for years, received a good deal of public attention as a possible cause of a number of allergic reactions suffered by persons eating in restaurants. In some cases, the allergic reactions were severe enough that people were required to seek medical attention or even hospitalization.

Health and Welfare Canada's health protection branch held consultations with many experts on the issue, including groups such as the Allergy Information Association, the Canadian Society of Allergy and Clinical Immunology, the medical community, regulatory agencies from other countries, and the Canadian Restaurant and Food Services Association. A much clearer picture of the problem resulted.

The most common source of problems was narrowed down to the use of sulphites on fresh fruits and vegetables in salad bars in restaurants. Further meetings with the Canadian Restaurant and Food Services Association resulted in that organization taking voluntary steps to discourage the use of sulphites by its members. In addition to the voluntary measures, the health protection branch enacted regulations prohibiting the use of sulphites. Consumer education programs were also carried out. Based on all the available information these measures have been effective, and the problems with sulphites have been minimized.

I have discussed sulphites at some length because there are many similarities between the way that issue is handled and the manner in which a solution is emerging to food allergies in restaurants. There have been a number of unfortunate and even tragic incidents, and the various media have given this issue their attention.

Members of the House know that we are now in a period of consultation and discussion. Bill C-289 presently before the House is in some measure responsible for that. The Standing

Committee on National Health and Welfare of which I am a member, has held extensive hearings on the subject, during which the Minister of National Health and Welfare (Mr. Epp) indicated very clearly his resolve to go forward on the issue. Officials of both Health and Welfare Canada, and the Department of Consumer and Corporate Affairs, are actively seeking an effective solution to the problem. Extensive consultations are being held with the allergy associations, the medical community, and the Canadian Restaurant and Food Services Association. Bill C-289 is a commendable effort aimed at eliminating severe allergic reactions to food in restaurants. It is a step in the right direction, but the Bill put forward by the Hon. Member for Hamilton East (Ms. Copps) can certainly be improved.

Bill C-289 could better address the realities of the food restaurant business. Large chains may use highly standardized menus and even centralized food preparation, but the Bill is aimed at all restaurants. Restaurants, in particular non-chain restaurants, must be flexible. Various ingredients may be available to a chef today, but not tomorrow. Some restaurants change their menus on a daily basis. It would be next to impossible for a restaurant, even an establishment with its own printing facilities, to provide clients with a full list of ingredients used to prepare daily menus. For example, let us think of the main ingredients that go into a complex sauce. Menus could become bulky and impossible to read. Ethnic restaurants would have to translate the names of exotic ingredients, and still would not be able to guarantee that an allergy prone customer would be protected against unknown ingredients.

Furthermore, it is conceivable that customers with food allergies may get a false sense of security from such a list. One single lapse in concentration on the part of the restaurant and an additional ingredient in a recipe could have an unfortunate result. Under Bill C-289 not even a minimal substitution or change would be allowed. In view of the very nature of the restaurant business, Bill C-289 is not completely realistic. However, it is an attempt to deal with the problem that should and must be addressed. We must ask ourselves if it represents the very best way to solve the problem.

For example, some people believe that restaurant owners should be required to provide a verbal list of all ingredients used in food preparation, upon request, to customers suffering from food allergies. This method would be effective. It would relieve restaurant owners of the obligation and expense of a printed ingredient list, and could be more responsive to day to day changes.

I also understand that the food industry itself has come up with voluntary proposals for quick service food chains to provide lists of their ingredients in their food. Although these proposals are promising, they would not conform to Bill C-289. Something must be done to afford better protection to Canadians who suffer from food allergies when they dine out in restaurants. There can be no disputing that they need better information so as to avoid substances that are problematic for them. The question is how best to convey that information.